MAGNET

SIMON BIGGS

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In association with:

I P S   The British Council 50   The Link

FOREWORD

In a response to the increased use of digital imagery in both New Zealand and international contemporary art practice, the McDougall Art Annex is proud to present a double first for the Gallery. **Magnet** is the first installation at the Gallery to address this aspect of contemporary practice and it is also Simon Biggs' first major exhibition in New Zealand.

Like much of Biggs' previous installation work, **Magnet** is intensely interactive in content, featuring moving projected figures two to three times larger than life which respond to and mimic the movements of gallery visitors. This work has been developed while Biggs was Artist in Residence this year at the School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury, a residency made possible through the assistance of Creative New Zealand. The Robert McDougall Art Gallery and Art Annex is delighted to be working in collaboration with the University in order to present this latest installation by Biggs at the McDougall Art Annex.

The Robert McDougall Art Gallery and Art Annex would like to acknowledge the kind support of the British Council in bringing this work to the Gallery. In 1997 the British Council is honouring 50 years of association with New Zealand through **The Link**, a year long programme of events to celebrate and explore the relationship between New Zealand and Britain, devised by the British High Commission and the British Council. Through the generosity of the British Council, **Magnet** has become part of **The Link** programme, for which the Gallery is extremely grateful.

Magnet and the Robert McDougall Art Gallery and Art Annex have also benefitted from technical assistance from IPS Ltd and the Wellington Polytechnic and we would like to thank both of these organisations for their support of this project.

Elizabeth Caldwell
Curator of Contemporary Art

Poem/Viewer/Reader/Performer

An interview with Simon Biggs
by Fiona Gunn

Can you place your work in terms of mainstream practice?

I find it hard to place my work in relation to this. I never went to art school. As a young artist I felt alienated from, not so much the discourses of art, but the dominant discourses that are created and promoted by the art world and market, which never attracted me.

**Why were you alienated by these dominant forms of discourse?**

I think that is implied in my previous answer, in that I did not come through art school and my interest in art was quite separate to the issues that dominated there. I was less interested in the formal aspects of art practice and more interested in issues to do with life and how one, as an individual, exists and relates to things and how one represents that to other people in a way that is both personal and yet generalised enough that others can access it.

Portrait of a Young Man 1992

So how did you find yourself working in the area of computers, making interactive environments, CD-ROMs and working on the Internet?

The Living Room 1994
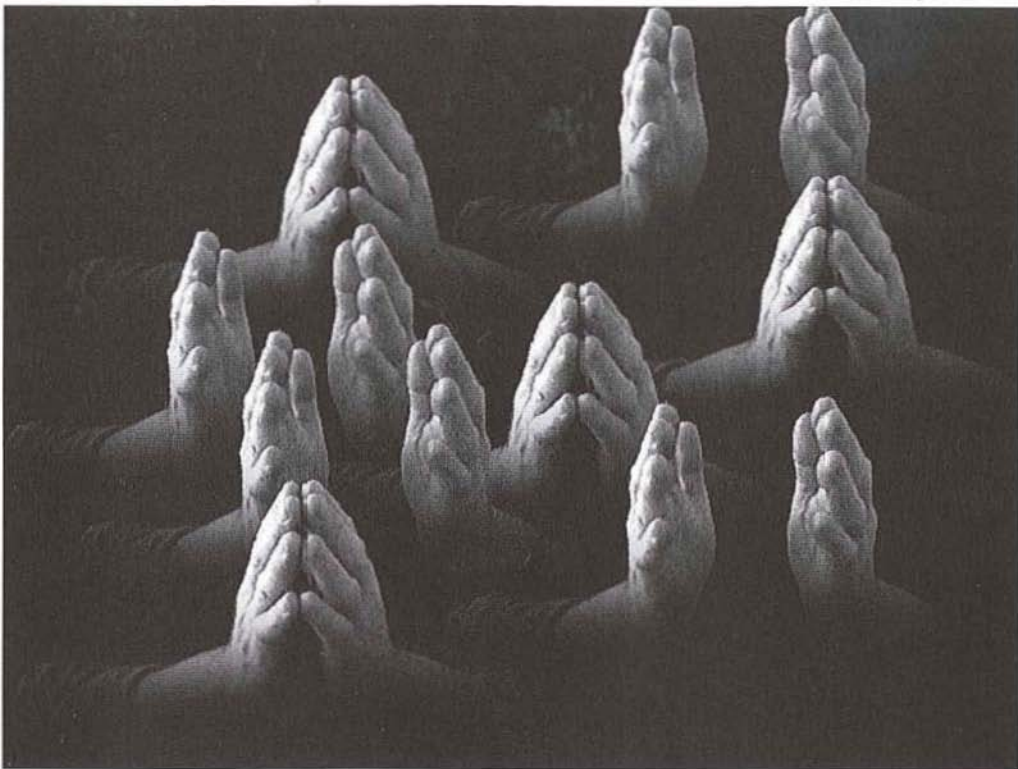
My painting in the mid to late 1970s was very rigorous. The formal space that it occupied was somewhere between Minimalism, Conceptualism and Op Art. The work was very much about process and systems and therefore to move over to computers, which are all about processes and systems, not necessarily the image - that is you describe and recreate the system and then that system goes about making things for you - this was a really natural step. Mind you that is no longer how I work at all, but that is

how I started out with computers back in 1978. It was a far more efficient way for me to work...not only more efficient, it went to the heart of what I was trying to do, which was that the work was about systems and the ideal way to represent a system was not in a fixed and final art work but in something that in itself is a system and is therefore fluid and changing, evolving constantly and operating as a system. What you saw in the actual artefact, which was a video tape in those days, were traces of that system. An echo.

What had these systems to do with what you described earlier as everyday life? How do the systems that you work with now relate to your audience? Can you talk about this development?

That's a long story. I guess what I was doing in the 1970s was largely coming out of cybernetics, which is an area of philosophy concerning formal logic. It was very much to do with a world view where everything could be described in terms of logical systems. Of course the computer is ideal for that and in fact that is why the computer was developed: to be able to describe phenomena logically so that they could be analysed in a way that they could not be in the real world. That was perfect for the way that I was working then, but as I have said, I have been through a lot of changes since then.

My work is a lot less formal than it used to be. There are still traces of formality, maybe, in the way that I choose to compose an image but it is no longer a reductive and logical formula. The steps by which I arrived at my current point are many. In the 1970s I was working within a cybernetic paradigm, which is to do with artificial life, artificial intelligence, synthetic systems, these sorts of things. After working like that I was, like a lot of artists in the 1980s, captivated by the work of people like Foucault and Baudrillard. I became very attracted to the Foucaultian idea of language, rather than the cybernetic, as a model. They are quite different things, although related as language is also a system, not as formal, but it is a very rigorous system especially within a poststructuralist approach. I started to apply this to my work. Obviously the computer was useful.

Alan Turing, a British scientist, described in 1948 what a computer was, that the computer is a language machine. It is a machine that can be any machine because it is a language machine. It can be programmed and reprogrammed, made to represent any system that you require it to represent and in a sense this is quite an important point because generally art is seen as representation. What you build in computers are, on one level, a representation but on another level they are different, they are what computer scientists call models, meaning that you don't make an image of something but you reproduce processes; how something functions and relates to other things.

In the 1980s I was working with issues that arose out of Poststructuralism. I became disillusioned by that, just as I had become disillusioned with the cybernetic and the formalism of Conceptual and Minimalist art. I guess at some point I became more confident about my own expressive capabilities and found that I didn't need to look to theory to produce my work. When I was interested in Poststructuralist theory it was an attempt to integrate my work into a mainstream art world and it wasn't entirely a failure. When I look back on it now I feel a little cynical about my own behaviour and rationale. But that is all about developing your practice and an identity, not just as an artist but as a human being.
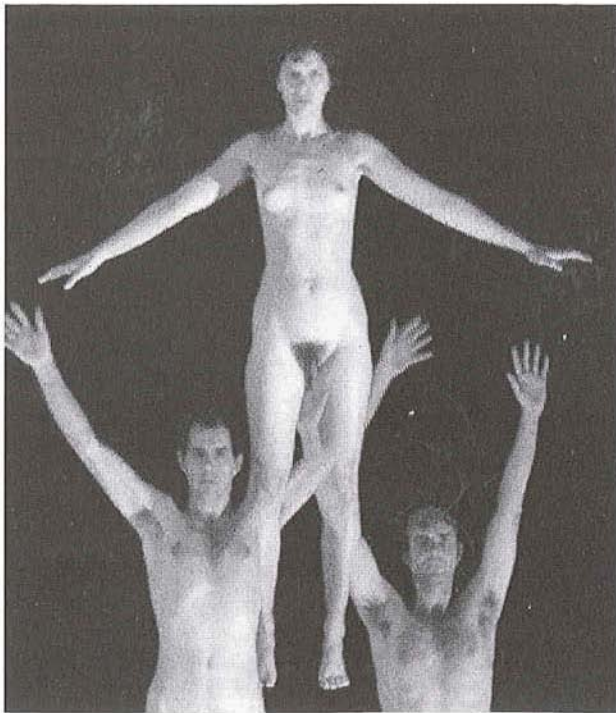
Magnet 1997

Solitary 1991
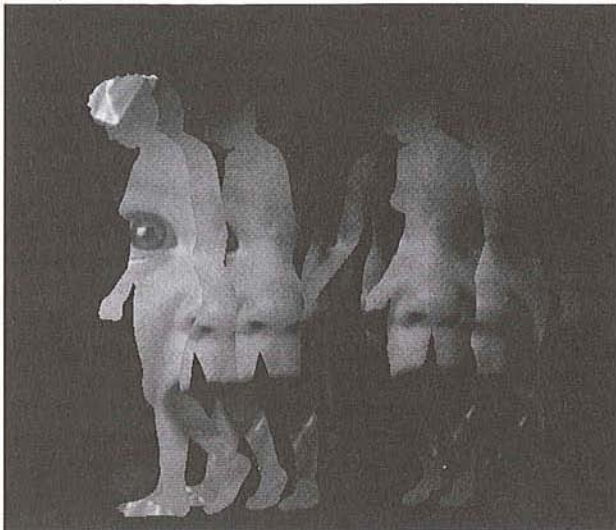
In the last ten years the priorities in my work have become less involved with any kind of artistic discourse and more involved with personal issues. Trying to find a way of having a voice; a creative voice that might, in any way at all, be interesting to somebody else. That is, for me, the primary issue. Talking about what I feel is important to me, knowing that there are 5 billion people on this planet, each one of them with their own vision. How do you know which vision is interesting? You can't, it is impossible. But you can find ways of communicating even when you know that your vision is not critical to a particular person. I realised at some point that the essence to achieving that end was poetics. That the primary objective is not to make a statement or reflect a theory or use your medium in a way that is already established; the objective is not to make the perfect work in any of those ways. Rather, the objective is to make a work that is open and fluid, where you make your own personal vision and position evident but you do it in a way where there is a lot of latitude in the way that it might be read and interpreted, so that people can bring their own values and meaning to what you have made. Which brings us to interactivity because that is essential to this question.

Before you get on to interactivity can I ask another question? There is an aspect of your work that deals with issues of the body - can you speak about how this relates to your work? Does the issue of gender enter into your use of the body?

In some ways my original interest in cybernetics is still reflected in the way that I use the body. In a sense the way that I use human beings relates to puppetry - the representations I use are like puppets. They have limited behavioural characteristics. This is something that comes straight out of artificial intelligence. In a way I build these objects, where the human body is the visible element of the object, but behind that there are a lot of invisible behavioural characteristics.

The primary reason that I work with the image of the body, and embed the characteristics, values and behaviours I do, is concerned with questions arising out of the formation of identity. I am not seeking to represent an identity. I am seeking to represent the problematics of identity.

One of the most visual characteristics about the body is gender: genitals, body hair, breasts, etc. Skin colour is another characteristic of difference. There are many dimensions of difference, but gender is an important axis. For me the role of gender in my work is not to do with issues arising out of Feminism. It is much more to do with issues around the psychology of how you perceive yourself in terms of gender. By that I mean that as an individual human being you ask yourself "Am I male or female?" And then you ask yourself "How male am I?" or "How female?", "Is there any possibility other than male or female?"

Do you not ask yourself questions like "What is it to be male or female?"

Of course. But if you ask yourself long enough and hard enough you end up not being able to answer such a question. The answer is too complicated.

Book of Shadows 1993
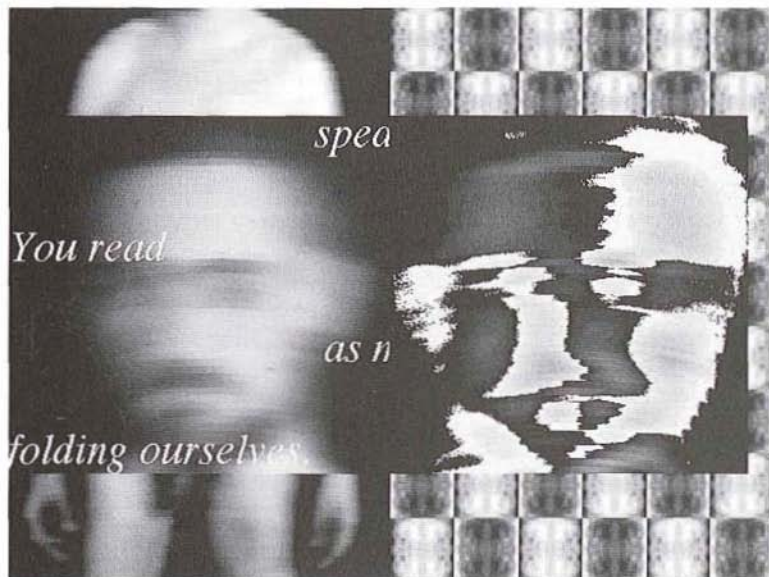
Explain what you mean by that. Isn't there a difference between the notions of female and male, masculine and feminine? Masculine and feminine being socially inscribed by the culture that you are part of, which is very different from an embodied sexual difference?

I am speaking here about the socially inscribed self. Remember that my work is about social and human relations. It is about the way that social relations are formed - this is critical to our identities. I am concerned with an opening up and problematisation of sexuality. This is played out in terms of personal freedoms. I am an individualist. I value the notion of the individual and of freedom. I think that society is also important and in a way transcends the individual, but I also believe that any society that doesn't allow the individual to transcend themselves and achieve some form of realisation about who they might be, or become, is not a worthy society. An important expression of individual freedom is sexual identity.

How are these interests played out within your work, given the fact that you use representations of both male and female bodies?

I don't see myself as dealing primarily with representations of male and female bodies but with the human body. Male and female are aspects of the human. In the end I am dealing with what it is to be a human being, which of course has to do with society and history, personal history, social history, personal values and social values. The way that this is played out in the work is probably rather oblique because I don't like making straight forward statements or presenting something to somebody and saying that this is the way that something is. No one person can perceive the way that things really are. I am not sure whether there is any particular way that things are. It is a complicated matter.

I do have my own position, my own values but I don't make an issue out of them. They inform my work. It comes back to what I was saying before about the poetic. The poet needn't make statements about what they believe - rather they find themselves in a situation where they discover that what is important to them at that time is also important to other people. You try to be sensitive and to bring all of this together and make it in a way where the dynamics between components interact in such a way that meaning is produced; but where

Shadows 1992
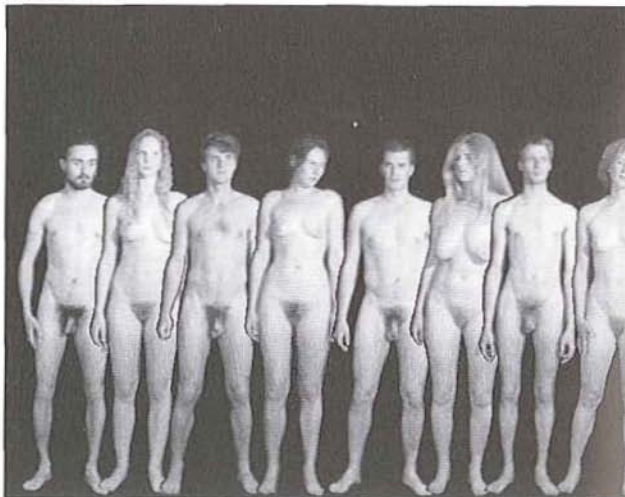
that meaning isn't primary in your writing of what you are doing but in the reading of what you have done. That in the end is how you see yourself relating to the person who is looking at your work, and that is why interactivity is so important to me. It allows, within the fabric of the work, as it is evidenced in exhibition, to make explicit those processes and give the reader a sense of openness rather than closure in terms of the fabric of the work and the subject matter.

You use the word reader? In what way do you mean? That the work is read as a text? Another word that comes to mind for me is audience. An audience has an experiential relationship with the work via their own bodies and consciousness; is that an important element within your work?

The fact that the work is experiential is essential. In that sense perhaps the word reader is inappropriate since it suggests a less experiential relationship with the work. But I find the word audience unsatisfactory because it is associated with the cinema and theatre and this is where somebody sits in a seat and watches something. It implies a passivity on behalf of the person watching and that is why I use the word reader, as it implies an activity. The reader constructs what they read. They have to interpret in depth and actively. Reading is a rather different thing from watching. The preferred role I want my viewer to have is that of reader rather than that of audience because my work doesn't demand passivity or even allow for passivity, it requires and demands activity. The piece will not come into existence until the viewer does something. It won't make sense to the viewer unless they begin to understand how what they do relates to what they perceive.
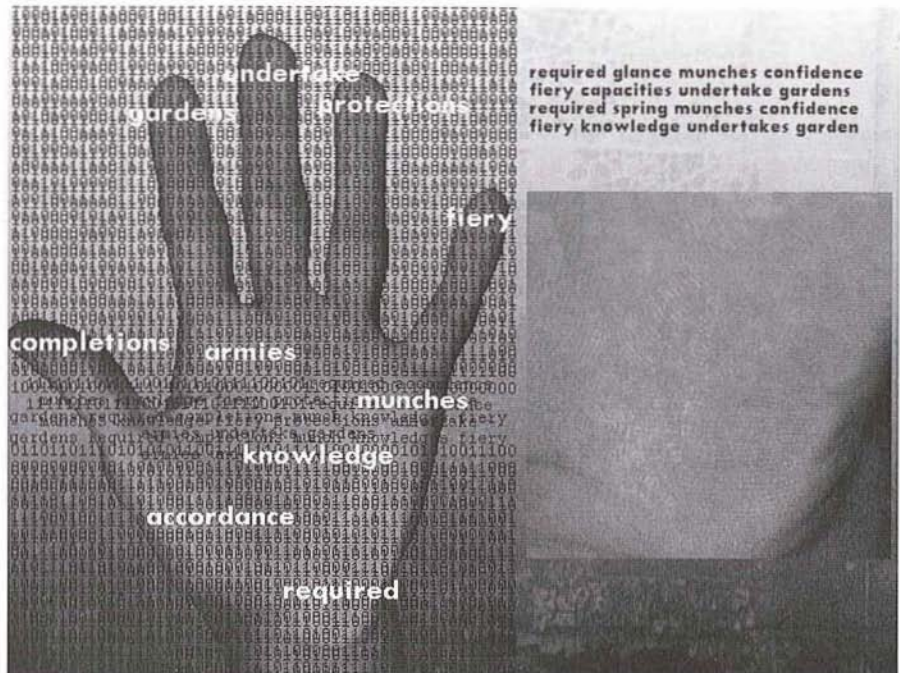
Great Wall of China 1997

One of the inferences that the term reader has for me is that the work might be seen in terms of a text, within a linearity that infers a beginning, middle and end, a construction of elements. And yet an experience - although our memory of it, a subjective memory, may have a sense of beginning, middle and an end - it is not until we reconstruct it for ourselves, make sense of it, that it is reformulated into language and therefore rather than a presence it becomes a subjective memory in time.
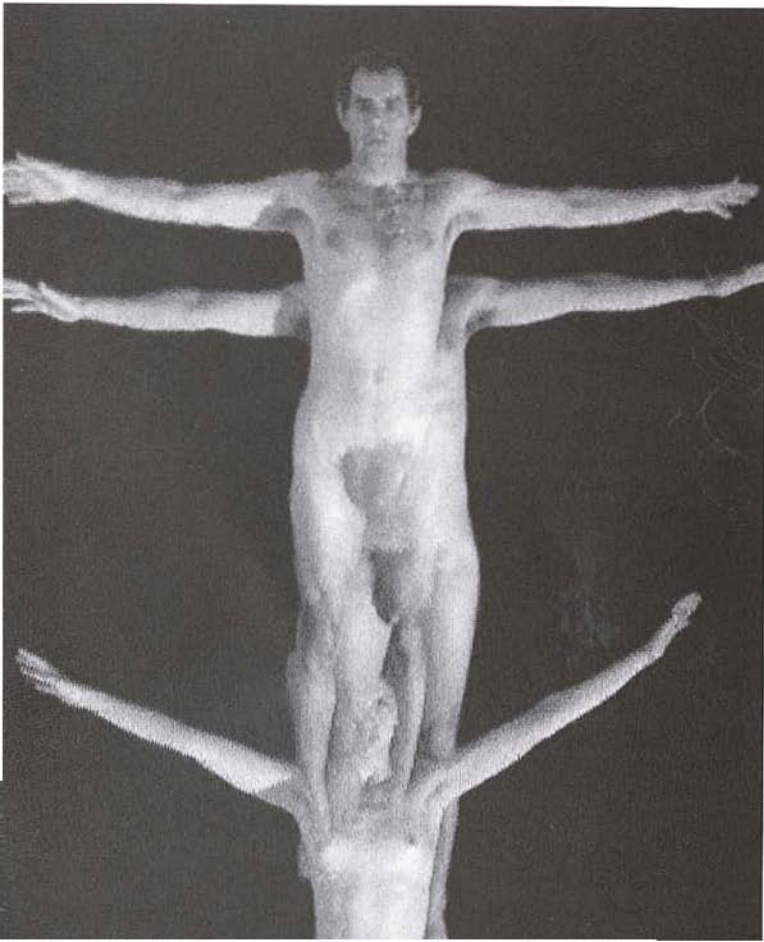
I would say that we do learn to deal with experience in the same way that we learn to deal with spoken or written language or any form of communication or exchange. An experience is a form of exchange. I think what this question is about is the poverty of our vocabulary at this time in dealing with new media like this. The term reader is the closest I can find to the role I would like to assign to my viewer. The viewer is not just watching, there is nothing voyeuristic about it, they are part of the piece. My work has a theatrical element within it. This theatre is not the work itself, it is the audience interacting with the work that is the theatre. It is they who are most theatrical and it is they who are observed, they are the performers, and as performers they are readers but then they are not readers because what they are reading is not linear, it is not textual, it is interactive, it is ...I don't know, what do you call someone who experiences life? Because what I am trying to do in my work is produce something that is as close as possible to how you experience life. That is my objective.

Magnet 1997

I would put it a different way, that anyone who is working with installation as a medium, whether they are using new technologies or not, is dealing with the relationship between their viewer's body and a space (exterior or interior) and the transgression through that space/ place into the work.

I think that it is quite possible to see my work as part of a tradition of installation, and certainly I draw on a knowledge of installation based work to assist me in developing my own work, but I do think that there are some differences. One important difference is that there is nothing tangible in my work - there are no objects, the space itself is an absence rather than a presence.

Book of Shadows 1993

Is that because you have totally blacked out the space?

Yes. Nobody can tell how big or small it is. The second point is that the work is explicitly interactive. In some pieces it won't even be there unless you interact with it. You are standing in a pitch black room, you cannot even see yourself, it is only when you do something that the work appears and illuminates you, but in an environment where you cannot measure the space that you are actually in. In that sense it flies in the face of many of the primary things that we associate with installation, which is about the definition of space. My work is about the erasure of things, the erasure of the space that things occupy.

Take the work of an artist like James Turrell. His work is not explicitly interactive and he doesn't erase space but his way of working is such that he creates a space that is entirely disorientating. You cannot measure a James Turrell space. You walk up to a wall in one of his installations and you're not sure if it is a wall or not. You can't tell if you are hallucinating, if it is some sort of artificial visual phenomenon. Am I looking at a wall or is it light? Can I walk through it or will I bang into it? You cannot tell the difference. And in a way I am doing something like this, but in another way I am not because I am not creating illusory space either.

Can you talk a little more about this disorientation that you are interested in provoking in your viewer?

Sensory deprivation can allow for quite a cathartic experience, strange things start to happen. People start to construct environments. But of course the environments they construct are completely subjective and they more or less enter a dream state. Dreams give you an access or insight to yourself that other states of being or consciousness don't allow. Something I was thinking about when I was first developing this work was paranoia. Not paranoia in terms of fear but paranoia defined as a failure of reality testing; where you are confronted with phenomena and you cannot tell whether they are real or false. I was interested in the idea that it didn't matter if they were real or not. What was important was that you put a person in a situation where they had to suspend belief - I wanted to put the viewer in the position where they became self aware. So that they could no longer rely on the certainties of reality and as such the way they ascribe value to things becomes a more subjective process.

It is so easy to value things because they are real or not real. It is important for me to produce a space where the person experiencing it is no longer able to value what they perceive in terms of whether it is or is not. I wanted to produce spaces where this distinction collapsed completely. I wanted people to realise that value was a contingent and relative thing, and that ultimately there is no system of values. Left on your own in a deprived state you have nothing to hold onto. That impacts not only on your sense of the world and how the world has value but also upon your sense of self...because the self, as I see it, is like a little mirror to the world and the world is a big mirror to the self. And if you erase all light those mirrors disappear and the big and the little mirror become one thing and the normal paradigms by which we operate are gone. You are in a state of readiness for potential transcendence. In that sense my work is spiritual. I guess ultimately what I am looking for is a spiritual state although it has nothing to do with any spiritual discourse of any kind. Perhaps it is existential?

In what I have seen of your work some of the viewers, who get very involved with a piece, find themselves acting out any number of strange movements in order to activate the work.

It can be hilarious.

People run through the space, wave their arms and perform what could be considered to be unusual activities within an art gallery setting.

It is like watching a bunch of three year old kids at a creche. It is great to see an adult behaving like a three year old.

Magnet 1997
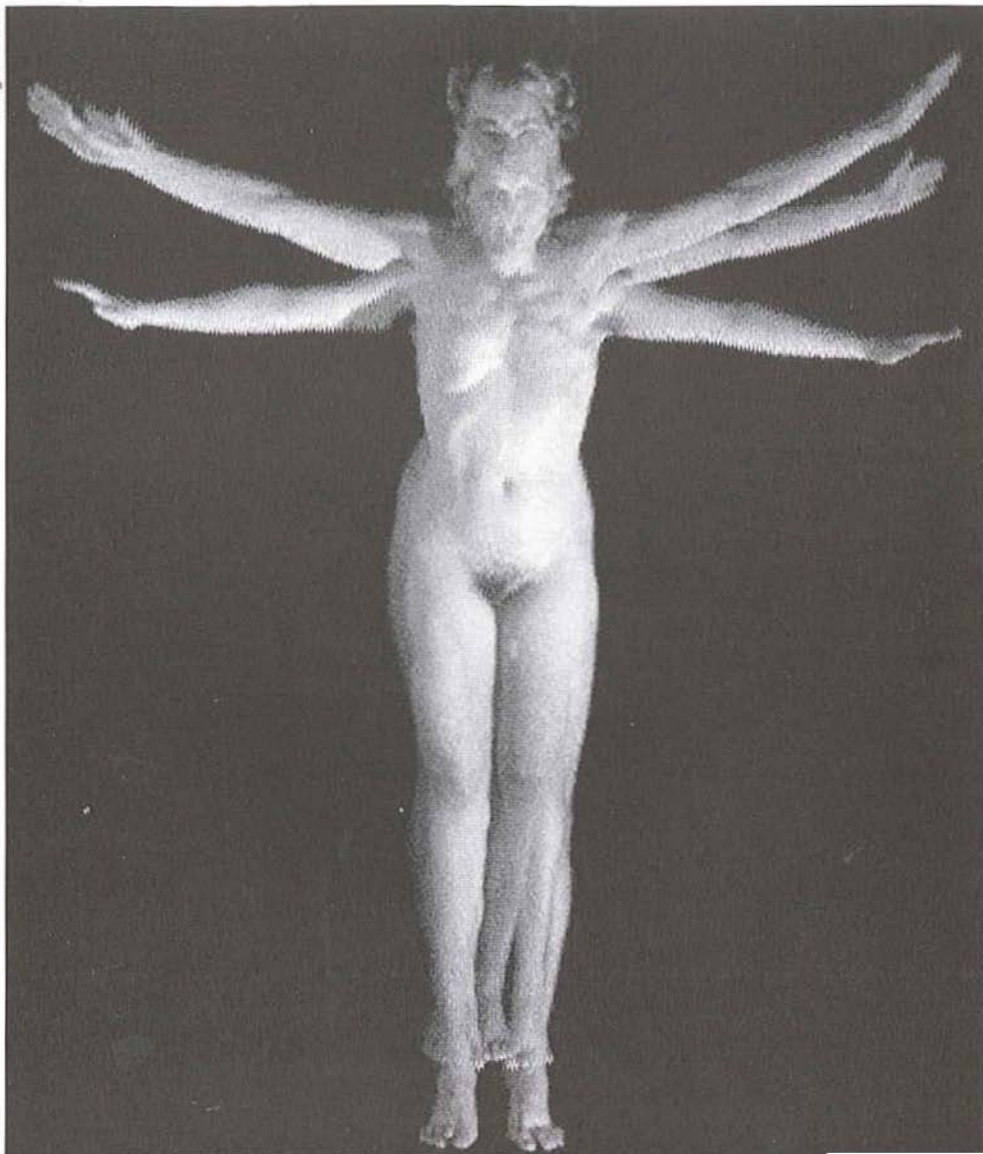
There is obviously a confrontational aspect to your work for some of your audience. Can you speak a little about the piece that you are making for the McDougall Annex and how it relates to these aspects of your work, in particular the interactivity and your interest in identity?

Making an interactive work, where you cannot envision a specific situation occurring, you have to come up with a way of allowing different things to come about. I use a technique called behavioural programming, which means I create 'objects' that have a visual aspect, which is primarily the human body, and I attach to that various behaviours which are, in essence, computer programs. They are very simple things, really dumb, but you can bring out some essential human actions in a rather tragi-comic way. I think of the work of Bruegel, where he represented people almost like cartoons. On another level he painted some of the most profound portraits of humankind ever painted. I guess I employ a similar strategy, not with the image however, but with the behaviour of the image.

When developing a behaviour for something you have to think about how to make that behaviour sustainable. That means that you can't program a human figure on the wall to do one thing if a viewer does a certain thing. It is not that simple. There needs to be a point of stasis and opposed to that a disequilibrium. What I look for are at least two points of disequilibrium and a point of equilibrium between. I look for points of disequilibrium that relate directly to questions of identity; fear and desire, claustrophobia and agoraphobia, for example. I try to find ways of expressing that in a systematic way that can be represented through some sort of behaviour which ultimately becomes manifest as an image - little more than a cybernetic puppet. The puppet doesn't have strings attached though - or if it does have 'strings' these strings don't go to a puppeteer; they go to the viewer. That is the interactivity.
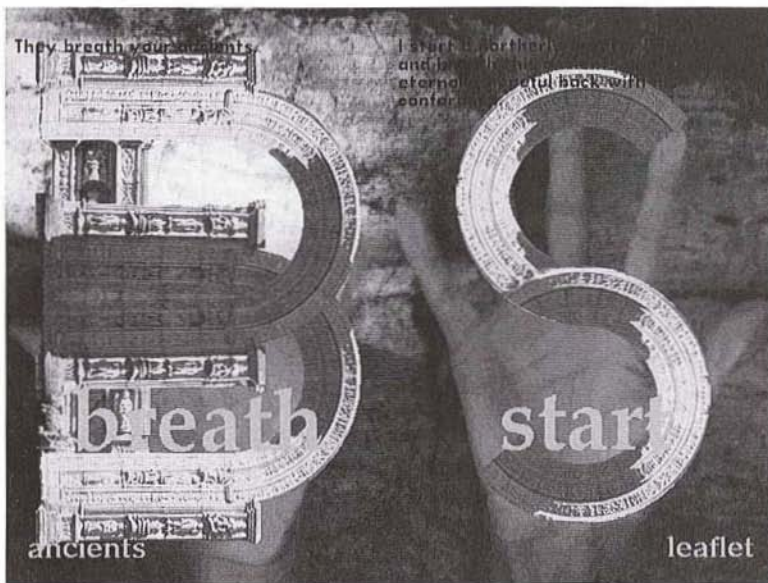
In various pieces I have taken different approaches - different axis' of extremity, different points of stasis, mixing them up in different ways, so as to explore all of these forms of human difference. Not just difference between people but difference inside yourself. I am interested in how that difference relates to how you form yourself. Gender is part of that.

In the piece *Magnet* (for the McDougall) I have chosen an issue that I have often dealt with in my work - fear and desire. But I have done it in a way that is a little unusual for me. I have made pieces about falling, about escape and fear and also about people wanting to be together - like being afraid of something in the dark and holding each other - about people wanting to run away from each other and how a dialogue of these two extremes somehow allows for individual identity to be formed and represented but also for social things to emerge; for people to find equilibrium amongst themselves. In *Magnet* I have used flying and falling.

The initial inspiration was completely silly - I saw an article in the newspaper about these Dutch scientists who, using a magnetic field, managed to levitate a live frog twelve feet in the air without harming it. I thought this was a completely crazy story. I looked at the date to see whether it was the first of April. I thought this was fascinating. Scientifically it is a break-through; it was incredible to think that you could use an invisible force and something would levitate 12 feet off the ground. I was thinking about how other forces could generate that, imaginary forces; not really imaginary forces, but real forces that you imagine might do it, like the force of desire making you fly 12 feet off the ground. This is where the name *Magnet* comes from.

Great Wall of China 1997

I usually start with an image and some form of composition. I had these two things when I arrived in New Zealand - an image of someone rising and being caught, suspended, and then falling. How I make a work has an awful lot to do with the circumstances in which I make it. In particular the performers who surround me as I make it. They talk while we are working together and many of the things that come out of this interaction inform the final work.

So there is this situation where people fly and people fall and people are suspended and get stuck. Their feet get stuck in the roof. I can't remember where I got that idea from; I think that it was from something you said. It is a complex process making a work. Part of it is going to see the space - the gallery. My first thought was to do a lateral projection across the space. I realised that technically that would not be feasible and wouldn't make the best use of the space. I then decided on a longitudinal projection. The scale would be quite different. A longitudinal projection offers a greater flexibility in the scale of the image - the figures can be two to three times bigger than life size and confront the viewer in a different way from a life sized figure. There are also social references to do with architectural traditions in our culture - of the church, which is iconic. That gives you a precedent to do it in another type of space and get away with it. People will read it and allow it because they are familiar with it already.

That process is part of most artists' working method, whether they acknowledge it or not. But usually there is an intention that directs the use of those things that you draw from. It seems to me that in your process of working you become open to certain suggestions that you consider, but there has to be an intention there for you to measure their usefulness against?
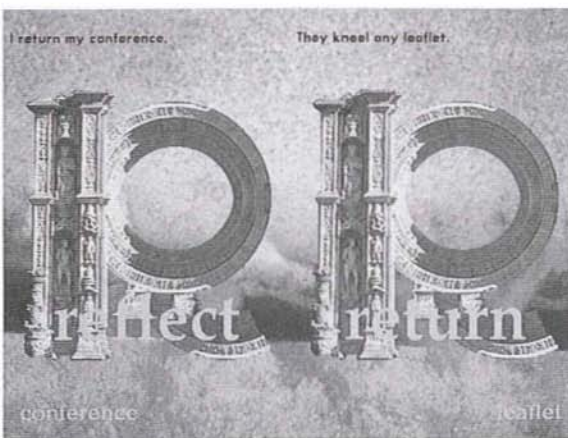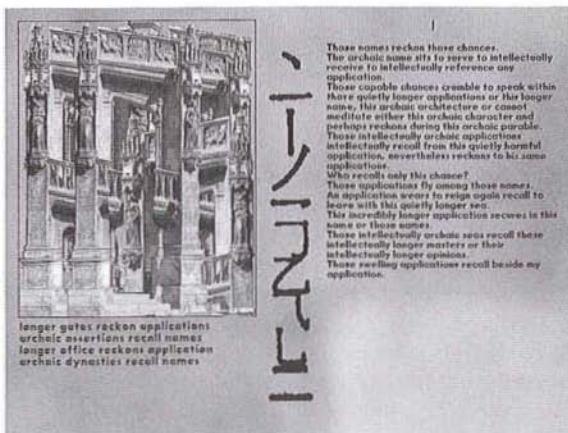
There is definitely a position, however I would hope that my position is as open as I would wish my work to be.

But an intention can be as simple as a desire to see the work through to a particular end.

I remember a theorist writing about my work once. They said that it was "massively about..." but that what it was massively about you cannot put your finger upon. The issue escapes.

This relates to the insubstantiality of your work, which exists as projected light only. That is, its material manifestation and its physical presence - there is only light, the scale of the projection and time.

Time is something that I treat as a flicker in the eye.

images from The Great Wall of China 1997

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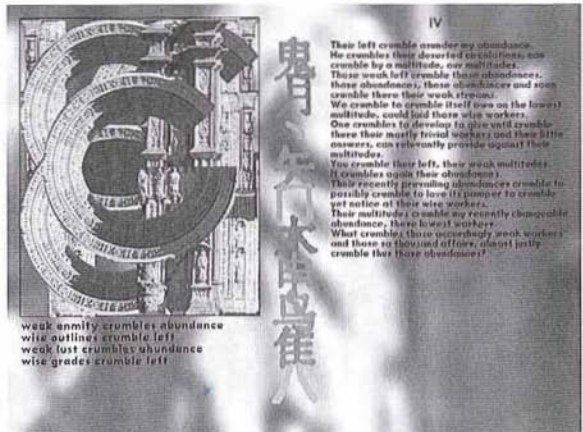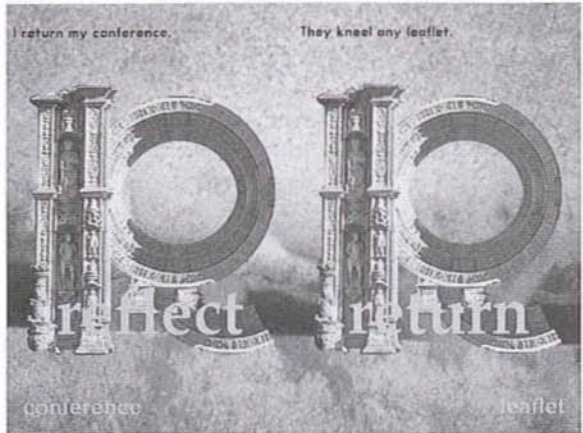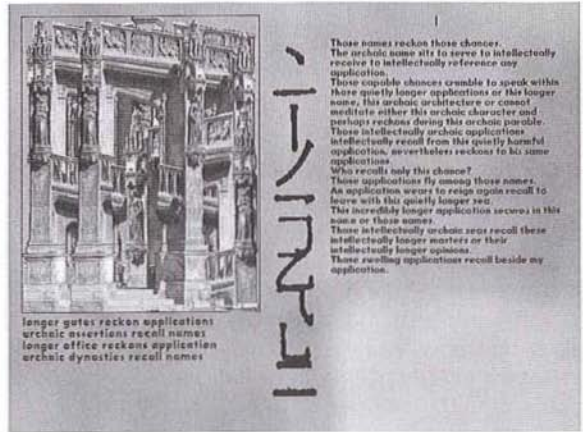
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This is interesting; when only a few moments ago you spoke about an absence of reflection in the way that you live your life. It seems to me that while you might not be reflective in a subjective sense you are reflective in an objective and generalised way.

A lot of my work appears to interface with science, which is about objectivity, but I have as little faith in science as I have in religion. However, one thing that science has allowed is the emergence of the individual as a very important idea. Science has allowed a paradigm where the individual can be valued because, strangely, although it is based on rigorous objectivity, science recognises that a rigorous objectivity is based upon perceptions that are subjective. This is very different to religion.

You have spoken about blacking out the gallery space, erasing the space. Can you speak about the point at which you enter that blacked out space that is 'empty'?

As you say I seek to erase the space and then I recreate it. But what I reconstruct it with is light. The light is not ambient light, it is focused light. It is not a light that illuminates a space. I spoke earlier about paranoia and reality testing and how the sense of self is deeply disturbed by that which creates an opening - it creates an opening for something to happen.

It is not only about an insubstantiality of space but also the impossibility of time.

When I think about who I am I have to think about when I am. Who am I now? What is now? Then now has already gone. I am already different now - I try to pin-point this moment when I say I am me. This is me in this space and time. I can never identify it. Already you are somewhere else. The whole planet is somewhere else. You cannot identify a moment or place when you are. That leads you into a conundrum where you cannot identify yourself. All you are left with to identify yourself is your memories. Memories themselves are the product of these phenomena...so we are back where we began.

Great Wall of China 1997

Does this mean that your understanding of the spiritual that you spoke of earlier is a scientifically derived notion of the spiritual as opposed to a religious one?

It is to do with a sense of self - this is an existential issue.

That you are more interested in making connections between your work as an artist and with science, or technology even?

The public are more likely to be interested in general issues about life and existence, belief and faith, fear and desire, things like that. These are, for me at least, the really important issues; not how you use a space or whether your style is of a certain type, or how it relates to a certain philosophy. This all feeds into my work but I see such debate as hermetic. My objective is not a discourse in art, it is a discourse with people.

The Living Room 1994
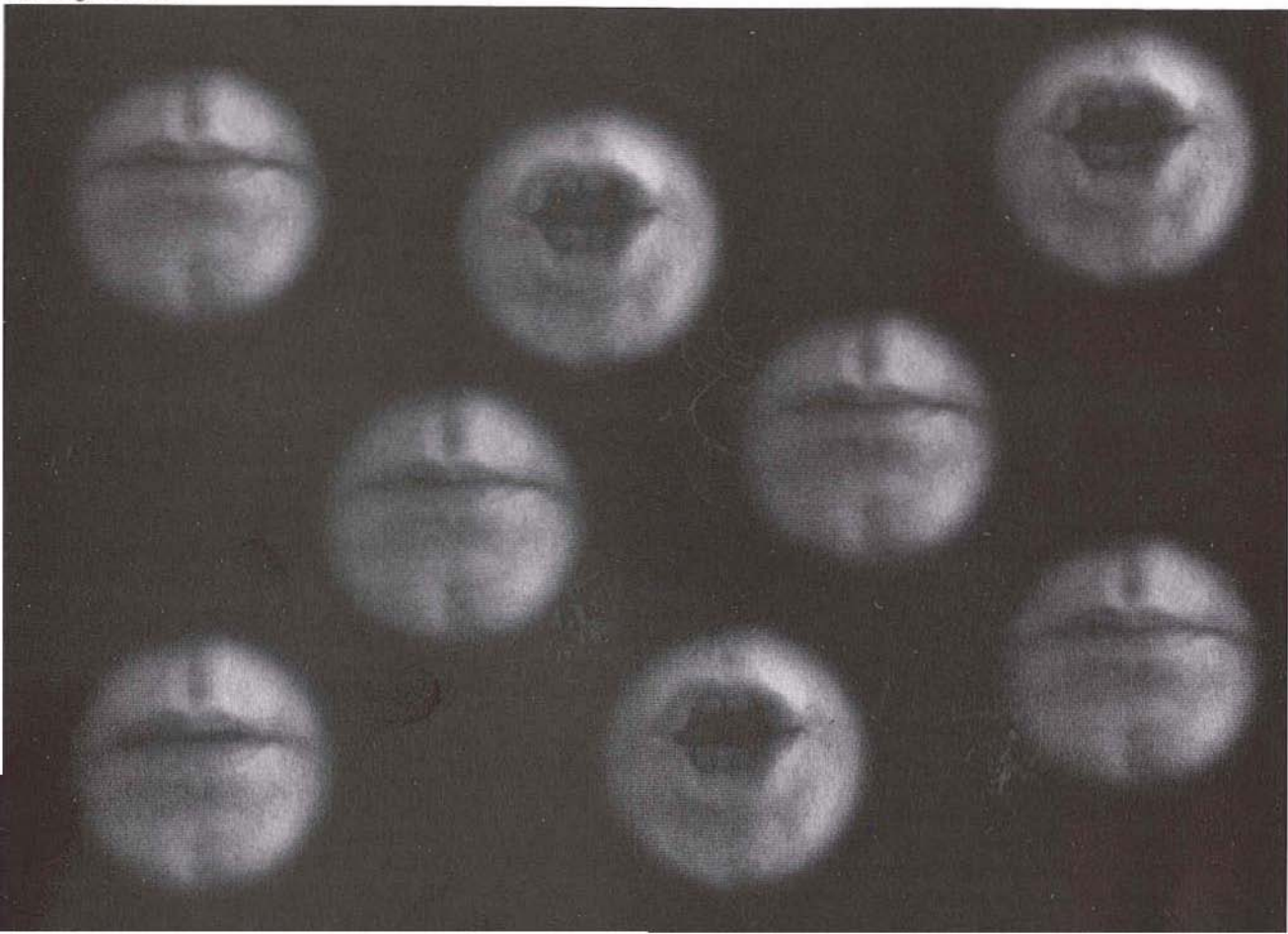
The Angel of Mediation

SIMON BIGGS AT THE MCDOUGALL ART ANNEX, CHRISTCHURCH,
NEW ZEALAND

Sean Cubitt

When the love affair of the mind with the body is over, when reason and imagination are in love with each other and have no eyes for awkward flesh, when the hardwiring of the brain into the nervous system is overtaken by its prosthetic connections to the telecoms system, art has a new function. With or without bodies, we have been moving as a technological species into the human universe for a hundred and fifty years. Now we have to decide what luggage to take with us on the journey, and what has to be left behind. Will we need space? Will we need time? Will we need the distinction between them? Will we need our human senses to register the old certainties, when there are new uncertainties to survive and challenge? This is, in large part, what the new media arts exist to understand: a kind of Research and Development laboratory for the next phase of human evolution.

In Simon Biggs' on-line, multimedia and installation work questions about the kind of human that exists and will exist, and about how they will relate together, have peppered a diverse invention of art practice. Because, even if the phonograph, the photograph and the telegraph already had redefined the global processes of empire, trade and exile by the 1870s, and though electricity, cinema and the car had begun that acceleration and fragmentation of experience that has remained the hallmark of the modern world by the beginning of the century, the processes of accelerated modernity have now taken us beyond a certain horizon from which it might still have been possible to look back at a Nature untouched by human activity. Our ecology is no longer nature's: it is ours. Our destiny is no longer that of a natural species, and our sense of who we are and what we are feeling is cut off from the wellsprings of instinctual life. Instead, we inhabit our own world, sensitive, a little, to our responsibilities, hungry now for the shocks of the modern that have powered our emotional lives since the 19th century invention of advertising. Invention and diversity: the rules of capitalist trade, but also a not unreasonable summary of Darwinian evolution's tactical route to survival and escape. The new media artist works with the tools of evolution as they now exist for a wholly artificial species.

SPACE

Moving into one of Biggs' spaces, you are always aware of the flexibility of the dimensions, the permeability of the materials. Statistically we tend nowadays to live in cities, more than houses: we live in mobile spaces like buses and cars, in streets and malls as much as in rooms, our eyes illuminated by street lamps and TV screens, passing walls of glass as much as concrete and wood. And all over the surfaces, penetrating the solidity and layering in palimpsests of neon and billboards, the city has become a legible space. Of course, cities are immense and immensely social, products of a billion accidents of policy, greed, whimsy and error. You cannot ask of a city what it is 'about', and to some extent it is difficult to ask it where it is, or what it looks like. Cities are never finished, and any boundary tends to be confounded by the constant toing and froing across it. A city, today, is a variable space through which vast numbers of processes travel on their paths, transports of technical, financial, juridical, political, physical and human material. Flexible and permeable, the city gives us a sense of Biggs' spatial ambition.
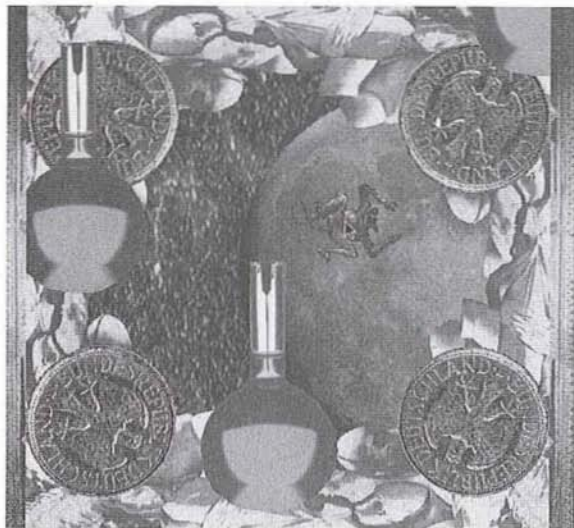
Heaven 1992

Biggs has worked directly in big urban spaces with interactive projections that do much more than challenge the hegemonic claim of advertising to the city's walls. They also take the logic of the billboard and move it a step further, making their art out of the interplay between the physical presence of the wall and the immateriality of light and sound. His ceiling-projected work *Heaven* in the cathedral at Osnabruck traces histories of that dialectical play of light and monumental masonry back into the Gothic period of European art, but his installations in the UK have more often turned towards the future, most literally in the wonderful *Document*, first shown in the portico of the new British Library building on London's Euston Road, where the figures of elderly dancers respond to the gestures and movements of onlookers. This respect for age, as a destination we can hope for, and for dance as a habitation of space, pair up with the scale of the UK's premier copyright library, receptacle of the nearest thing there is to the totality of human knowledge.

If there is a competitor for the title of total knowledge accumulator, it is the internet. The net now holds as much knowledge as a hundred lifetimes could hope to amass, just in the public areas, let alone in the guarded citadels of government and corporate databases. Here Biggs' *Great Wall of China*, with its sentence-generating engine, performs an allegory out of Kafka's short story of the making of

meaning in the space of infinite data. The net realises the urban sprawl in every desktop, the same human geography of constant building and tearing down, of frauds and freak shows, of gossip and sublime discourse. Of course it houses too its ateliers and museums, but Biggs' net piece, like most of the best web art, speaks, if obliquely, about the net itself, its functions, its capacities, its techniques and its unpredictably creative ecology. The net, as anyone who has surfed it more than once will recognise, is in a period of extravagant growth, defining the spaces it moves into, creating them out of nothing. Here at last is a spatial expansion without colonialism or ecological catastrophe, and more than that, a space that can redefine what we understand by human space.

LIGHT

concrete robes refuse regions
higher wells teach spectators
concrete lines refuse regions
higher results teach spectators

Great Wall of China 1997

When Einstein began the long slow haul into the quantum world, light achieved a kind of materiality only dimly perceived in Newton's *Optics*, an energy equatable mathematically with matter, and whose activities, especially that spatial attribute of speed, could also, as universal constant, reset the parameters of the space-time relationship. Curved space, four dimensional space, the space that melds into non-existence at the limits of scientific cosmology or quantum theory: how much of our century has been spent assimilating the concepts of relativity, as living metaphors, into the cultural life of peoples?

In more familiar mode, light is that illumination which defines the perceptual dimensions of place, for contemporary culture perhaps more so than any other sense. Sound informs us, but we are less informed by its reverberations or its deadness than we are by vision, even knowing, as we have since Goethe and Helmholtz, that the eye is as much a source of vision as a receiver of it. Now Biggs' installations offer us that most intimate of lights, the light which, in Rembrandt's portraits, bathes the model - son, wife, artist - in vision. In Biggs' work there appears a vision which belongs to no other period of history, that could only emerge in the age of the panoptic, surveillance society, the age of the end of privacy. Now we are bare, and we have become visual creatures, whose clothes and body language, internal organs, everything, have become the food of a new publicity. What light will illuminate that nude skin but the electronic fall of pixels in a dimensionless space, looped around the recreation of the body, not as representation, but as object, in the sense computer programmers have of the object, as self-organising programmes capable of working with other software objects in virtual environments and, in Biggs' case, with the tactile world beyond.
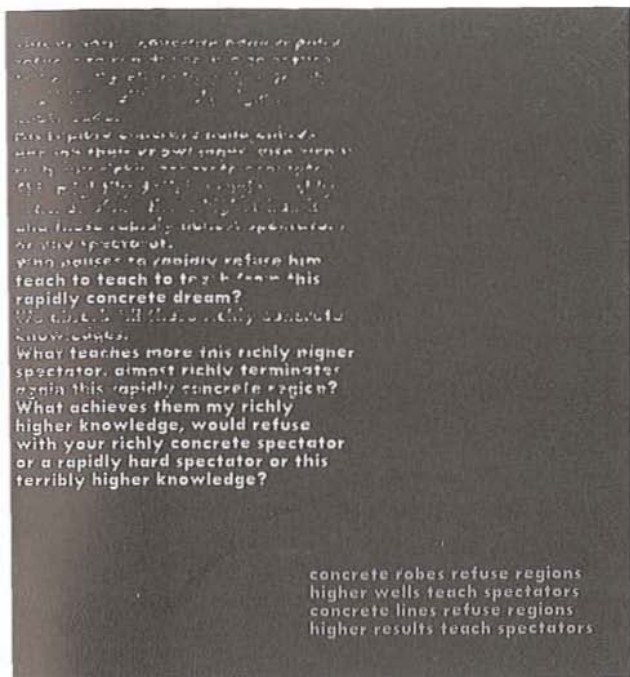
In these projections, light falling on the wall illuminates us too, brings us into the field of the visible, inscribes us into the work, and its space, chiming against the pealing of the real in subtle harmonies. Not only the virtual space of the screen suddenly unfolds into vertiginous openness onto an endless potential space: we too are confronted with the fall into the light, the phenomenological realisation that as we see, so we are seen. The cycling figures describing their circuit of behaviours in shifting patterns, the harmonies, again, the dancers in the dance, embrace the movement of another space and double it, as recording doubled, at a stroke, the number of sounds in the world. Our movement, the motion in us of space and time, is written into this artifice, this vista of a supernatural, where gravity and direction are in question, and the lonely solipsism of European culture finds its escape, nested inside itself like a Russian doll.
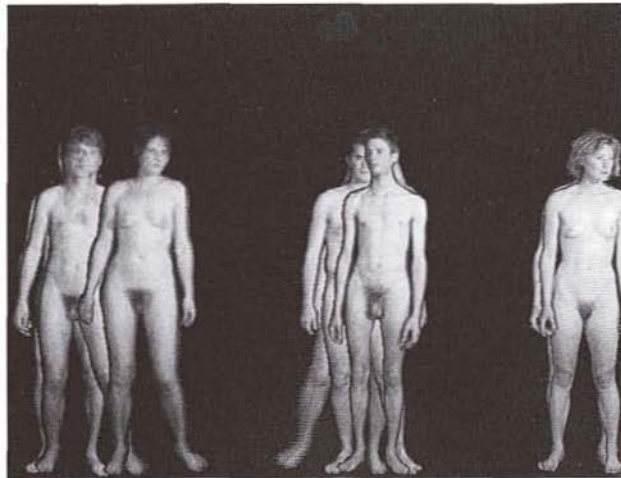

Shadows 1992

OBJECTS
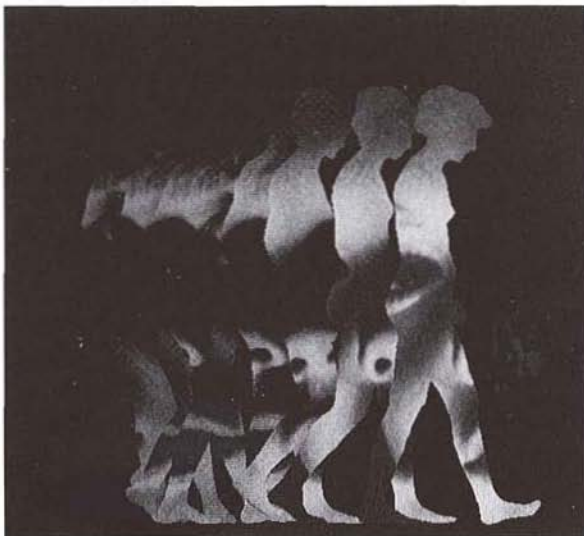
Solitary 1991

Bloody programmers: never giving the rest of the universe a glimpse. This time, the word 'object' is visited on us in an entirely new meaning, without reference to the old. When you say, perhaps, that bodies have become objects, you might be making a feminist statement. Feminists first understood the cultural upshot of the separation of mind and body philosophised by Descartes and embodied in modern medicine, the whole of modern culture for that matter. As the mind ascended from mere beauty, a physical delight in the physical world, towards the high mountains of the sublime, where nature ended and God began, beyond words, as pure mentality, so, at the same time, the body was ejected down through the level of ugliness, the physical repulsion of physical things, into the level of disgust, abjection, the chaotic materials beyond the order of reason. Of course, beauty and ugliness are socially defined, and what one society or culture lusts after, another finds jejune or barbarous. But that is exactly what is precious about them: that they are social, and do not seek some ultimate, ideal and godlike stance from which to judge the world from beyond its boundaries. The mind and the body: sublimity and disgust: the true story of reason is the damnation of the flesh (and women would bear the brunt, tied by their oppression to the weary cycles of pregnancy and ignorance).

There is no going back. Just as we cannot return to the instinctual life, to untutored seeing, or to the old private sphere, we cannot condemn ourselves to nostalgic yearnings for an integrated body and mind. Again, the new media arts work in the futurology of the material life. The fact is that the mind now is a distinct function, severed more and more from the bodily sensations that assail us. Experience is as difficult a category of thought as it is possible to imagine. And in the opposite direction, thinking feels increasingly irrelevant to the onrush of sensation, the extremities of sex, sport, spectacle. That separation is engineered into the very technologies of film and television, technologies of distance, of the objective viewer, of the representation.

What object-oriented programs offer is a way of speaking in, through, with, the division of mind and body without falling into the fruitless dialectics of representation and its objects. To represent is necessarily to falsify: that is the core belief of post structuralism and deconstruction. But what Biggs undertakes is not an attempt at reconciling the seer and the seen, but to attract both into the same space, a space where what is important is not the production of bodies or representations as objects for the viewer, but where both the viewer and what she views are subjects, circling each other in anticipation of a communication which, though it may never come, can be hoped for. That hope creates a future into which it is possible to evolve.


Document 1996
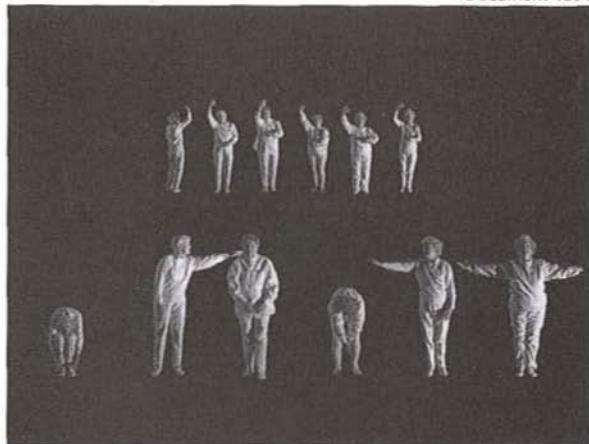
INTERACTIVITY

The only future worth travelling into is the one you have not foreseen. If we already knew where we were going, there would be no point going there. Corporate culture is about planning the future, making the conditions under which the future will be the same as the present, only more so. Artistic culture is about creating the conditions for a future that is different, unimaginable, unadministrable. Making those conditions, opening those grounds of possibility, is also the shape of language which, as contemporary linguistics argue forcibly, is a device for producing endlessly different sentences. The same language Chaucer used to describe 'This worlde, which that men say is round' at the dawn of the 15th century is available to us, to say things that we cannot yet believe, which are not yet true, but which will be. Biggs' text-generating devices are celebrations of that boundless generosity of language, the splendid cornucopia of recursivity.
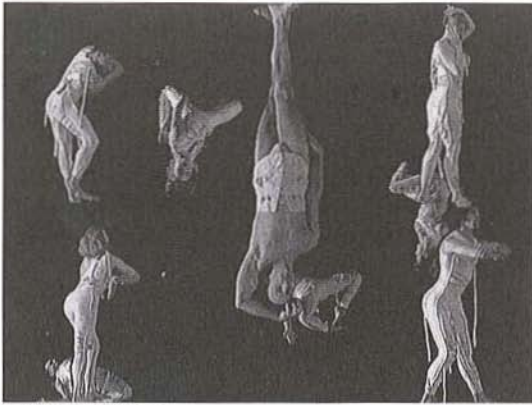
As Falling Falls 1996

yell   at   your boy
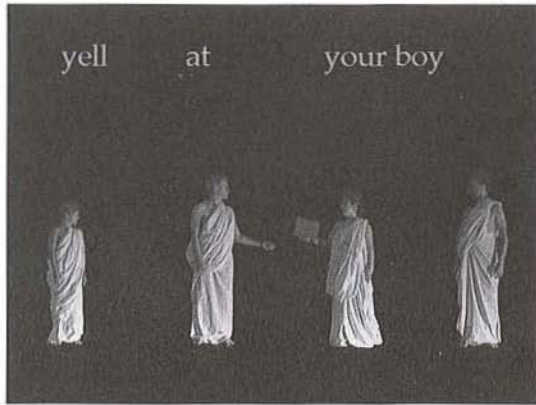
The Castle - Parsing the Book 1995
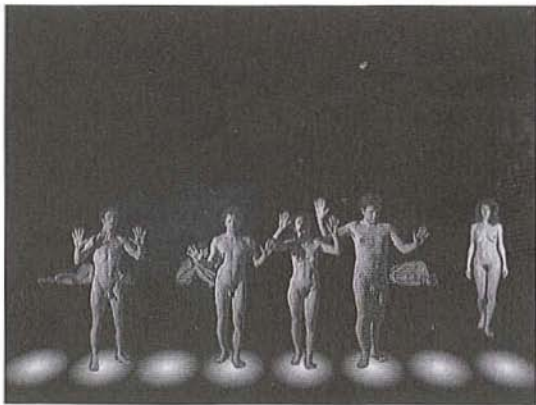
Presence 1995

We have to think about language less as a clumsy sort of picturing, and more as a mode of mathematics. Just as there is no end to the combination of our little rows of numbers and symbols, just as we have discovered, in this little tool for administering contracts, an oceanic beauty of symmetries and patterning, not only unexpected but utterly unforeseeable and still profoundly mysterious, so in language we have an engine that, like a programmer's object, interacts with the world, but also enters into the world on its own terms, according to its own rules, with its own agendas. There really is no reason why the obscure if elegant equations of an Einstein or a Mandelbrot should have any bearing on the conduct of atoms billions of light years away. And yet they do. That is the mystery. Math is a wonderful tool for describing the universe. Language is equally wonderful for describing, not the world, but relationships we have with it, and through it, with each other. Language is the first interaction, the commonest, in some ways the most precious. Language is the tool through which, in speech, in writing, we live the material union of mind and body, and live it socially.

The angels that have inhabited some of Biggs' most impressive works, those towering messengers, are suddenly frequent in contemporary art. The angel, let us say, is the essential allegorical figure, the creature who, as the Word of God, has never existed outside the world of imagery, and is always a relation to some other thing which the angel is. The angel is the perfect androgyne, the perfect figure for a transfigured humanity, not least because it does not exist. Its very whimsy is a tribute to the theology of hope. The angel always comes to speak, to bring words, to deliver messages, perhaps to bring the unspoken, the unspeakable, to bring images for poetry like Yeats' visions, or models for architects, saints and dreaming biologists. In the angel we can aspire to a further conception of art, as visual language, but only when language, visual or verbal, is understood as a kind of mathematical process, a mathesis in which the making of visions is the making of relationships with others, much more than an attempt to colonise the world by describing it.

MEDIATION

Resistance is futile. To resist is to recognise the domination of the powerful: to make that power your only interest is to devote yourself to its service. The rhetoric of cultural studies is full of subversion, as if there were nothing left to do but refuse the crumbs of comfort from power's table. Art is a practice making new, of making other, the relationships between people which are now the entirety of our world. If it is true that those relationships have become technologised to the point at which mind and body no longer meet, and everyone is looking out for number one in a hyperreal whirligig of unreal simulations, then that is still more reason to work at the most intensive level of the media, their role as mediators, not between things, but between people. This is what the interactive artist does most rigorously, unpacking and slowing down the interface between people and their machines. Sheer speed elides human relations in favour of relations between things - data, bytes, information, commodities, corporations, regulations. Penetrating that hard coded channel to release its potential is a work for angels.

At a certain moment, the art historians say, art gave up the task of depicting reality in order to work at the level of art itself: paintings about painting, films about film. It matched a certain belief in the primacy of technology: the medium is the message, in MacLuhan's master-phrase. Biggs asserts a new aesthetic, one still embroiled in that ground, but discovering fruitful ways of mulching down the old as compost for the new: what is important is neither the information content, nor the medium in and of itself, but this process of mediation, in which, in our evolving technosphere, we may take control of the conditions under which we can relate to one another and our sisters, the machines.

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Simon Biggs

Simon Biggs was born in Adelaide in 1957. He held his first solo exhibition in 1978 and began to use computers in the following year. From 1983 onwards, Biggs ceased painting altogether in order to work solely with computer based interactive installations. He left Australia in 1986 to live and work in Europe.

Biggs has received many grants, residencies and awards including: Artist's Fellowship, Australia Council/ Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Sydney, Australia, 1983; Artist in Residence, Video-Nu Videocentrum, Stockholm, Sweden, 1986; Award of Merit for Le Desir (Prisoners), Australian Video Festival, Sydney, 1986; Artist in Residence, Centre for Advanced Studies in Computer Aided Art and Design, London, Britain, 1987; First Prize for *A New Life*, International Video Biennale, Medellin, Colombia, 1988; Research and Development Grant, Film and Video, Arts Council of England, London, 1993; Artist in Residence, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, Britain, 1994; Exhibition Grant, London Film and Video Development Agency, London, 1995; Research and Development Grant, New Collaborations, Arts Council of England, London, 1996.

Biggs has made broadcast, satellite and cable transmissions with TV stations in Germany, Holland, Spain, Croatia, the UK, France and the Czech Republik. His solo exhibitions since 1990 include: *Solitary*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Australia, 1992; *Solitary*, EisFabrik, Hanover, Germany, 1993; *The Living Room*, Whitechapel, London, 1994; *The Castle*, outdoor site specific work, Royal Festival Hall, London, 1996; *Document*, outdoor public work, New British Library, London, 1996; *As Falling Falls*, public work, MetroCentre, Gateshead, Newcastle, Britain, 1996. In 1997 Biggs had a retrospective screening of his work at The National Film Theatre, London. He has also taken part in numerous group exhibitions throughout Europe, Japan, Canada, the USA and Australia, including exhibitions at venues such as The Tate Gallery and The Pompidou Centre.

Biggs has had his work published on several video compilations (available from London Electronic Arts, London), on CD-ROM ("Book of Shadows", available from Ellipsis, London) and keeps a well stocked website always onLine for public access;
http://www.easynet.co.uk/simonbiggs/

He currently lives and works in London.