Chapter Two: Autoscopic Effects of Electronic Subjectivity

This chapter examines some of the specific effects on subjectivity stemming from our electronic/digital landscape. Firstly, to point out the obvious - our lives and our cultures are dominated by images. We are bombarded with up to 1000 images every day. They are so ubiquitous it is difficult to stop and see them for what they essentially are - flattened, dematerialised doubles of reality. Society is in the midst of a profound transformation wrought by the Internet, digital culture and communication technologies. Digital cameras and mobile phone cameras have increased exponentially the quantity and location of images circulating in society today. Digital cameras essentially dematerialise images and disengage the visual information from the physical world our bodies inhabit. The 21st century fusion of telecommunications with the computer has intensified the drive towards this disembodied existence. We are surrounded by virtual presences, phantoms, hauntings and doubles; in the airwaves, in the electronic eyes we carry in our hands in the form of mobile phone cameras, in our discarnate reflections played out in real-time footage of ourselves on surveillance cameras while waiting at the Post Office, supermarket or Medicare office. Under this electronic dazzlement through which we conduct our lives, where even our social relations are saturated with digital images (social media) - technology has come to structure our lives in such a way as to give dominance to the symbolic order of the imaginary. In this digital screen culture of weightless, ungrounded pictorial representations, philosophers such as Paul Virilio are describing a shift in experience which volatilizes the real and ‘obliterates the object of lived experience into technological modes of representation’, causing a ‘derealisation and dematerialisation

Figure 9. Suburban butcher, Mortdale, Sydney

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of the object’. Our electronic communication medias are populated, according to communication philosopher John Durham Peters, by ‘spectral beings who look and sound human but offer no personal presence and possess no flesh’. He goes on to point out that while our bodies know fatigue and finitude, their effigies - once recorded, can circulate through media systems indefinitely, across ‘the wastes of space and time’.

I will also argue that, following on from media philosopher Marshal McLuhan’s theory of sensory ratios and his notion of the electronic media as an extension of humankind’s central nervous system, that the growing tendency to privilege the mind over the direct lived experience of the body comes at a price. This price is a narcosis, a numbness at the point of the extension of the body, or, as he puts it, an ‘autoamputation’. And our constant self-reflection in digital imagery also entails a form of autoscopy, the clinical phenomenon of experiencing an hallucinatory image of oneself as a double. Long described in folklore and the romantic literature of the 19th century - for example, Russian novelist Dostoevsky explored the motif of the doppelganger in his book The Double and Hans Christian Andersen used the motif of the haunted double of the self in his fairytale titled The Shadow - the actual clinical manifestation of this - labelled autoscopy - is a relatively uncommon disorder, usually associated with medical conditions such as epilepsy, migraines, delirium and in psychiatric conditions. But in the past decade it has become the focus of a growing number of studies by brain researchers trying to understand the nature of self-consciousness and our sense of self-identity. Fascinating new research shows that the spatial unity between the self and body can actually be disrupted. In 2007 Swiss medical researchers

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107 Ibid, 140.
enacted a complicated experiment involving video cameras on healthy volunteers, and were able to induce what they described as a ‘drift of the subjectively experienced bodily self to a position outside one’s bodily borders’.

My work, *Narcissus / Gradient Mask Zero* (fig 11, 12 & 13) relates to the first aspect of my research topic, the externalisation of self in images, through digital technology. The work has a two-way mirror inserted into a computer screen. The character on the other side of the screen has had its regular face replaced by a flattened screen-like face. I first hand-built a head, then photographed the face after firing it. I was aiming for an expressionistic style of work, in order to emphasise the facial features. I then created a silkscreen from the photograph. A second head was built, with the face cut off and smoothed over. The silkscreen was stencilled onto the second head. I was specifically thinking about media philosopher Marshall McLuhan’s reference to the Greek myth *Narcissus* as a way of exploring these ideas. It can be interpreted on many levels, but I am concerned with two interpretations - the psychological view and secondly how it relates to McLuhan’s idea of the electronic media being extensions of the nervous system. Analysing the myth from a psychological perspective views it in terms of a self seeking identity, and becoming trapped in the shallowness of the reflection. The

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individual is unable to break through the surface. Narcissus, the young hero, mistakes his own image in a reflective pool as another, and falls in love with it. He cannot distinguish between self and other. He is trapped in the illusion of the reflection. The phrase *Gradient Mask* in the title refers to a process in Photoshop whereby you create a blur to give an impression of a depth of field in the image. When you see yourself on a digital screen, you are seeing a flattened two-dimensional image of a three-dimensional object. In other words, a flattened *depthless* reflection of oneself. Marshall McLuhan points out the word Narcissus actually shares the root word with narcosis - which means numbness. According to McLuhan, the extension via the mirror numbed the perceptions of Narcissus: ‘He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system.’ McLuhan argues that individuals become ‘fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves’. When I built this artwork, I was looking to find an old computer screen in which I could insert the two-way mirror, and both show some of the inner workings, as well as provide an ambiguous doubling of the face. The character cannot quite tell whether she is looking at herself, or at another image. I spray-painted the computer screen with a silver

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110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
Figure 13. Clarissa Regan, *Narcissus/Gradient Mask Zero*, 2010. Ceramic, computer frame, two-way mirror. 60 x 70 x 30cm.
metallic paint. I was working to bring the computer screen into the world of *representation*. While it is clearly recognisable as a very common object from the everyday world, (and I wanted it to be understood as such), I also wanted it to appear not quite real, but functioning on a symbolic level as well.

So, why is there such a compelling desire to saturate our environment with moving images - with *representation* of reality? Literary critic and author Terry Castle has described this process as the spectralizing or ghostifying of our mental space, essentially a ‘compulsive need ... to invent machines that mimic and reinforce the image producing powers of consciousness’.  

To understand what happens when the sense of sight is isolated from our haptic and other senses, it is useful to examine what McLuhan has to say on the subject. He sees tools and technologies as extensions of the human body. They amplify and extend our powers. The wheel is an extension of the foot; the knife, our teeth. He described the electronic media as an extension of our central nervous system. The price we pay for our special technological tools - whether they be a radio, the alphabet or a wheel, is that they are closed systems. They do not interact with each other, like our regular bodily senses. Yet our senses still need to be in a balanced ratio. I quote:

*More and more it has occurred to people that the sense of touch is necessary to integral experience. Our mechanical technologies for extending and separating the functions of our physical beings have brought us to a state of near disintegration by putting us out of touch with ourselves.*

He argued new technologies diminish sense interplay and consciousness, precisely in the new area of novelty in which they arrive. Because they isolate that sense, they tend to hypnotise society in that particular area. Drawing upon medical research into stress and its effects upon the body, McLuhan proposed the concept of ‘auto-amputation’. For McLuhan, any extension of the body is an attempt to maintain equilibrium. An

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112 Castle, *The Female Thermometer*, 137.
amplification in power, through a tool-like extension, is bearable by the nervous system only if it can block or numb the perception. In the physical stress of super-stimulation, the central nervous system acts to protect itself by isolating the offending organ, sense or function, he argues. The extension of the body is an attempt to maintain equilibrium. But the shock of the amputation declines recognition:

_Any invention or technology is an extension of self-amputation of our physical bodies and such extension also demands new ratios or new equilibriums among the other organs and extensions of the body._

These thoughts are echoed by media theorist Douglas Kellner, who proposes technological idealism generates concepts increasingly distant from common sense, the body and the material world and lived experience. I would like to draw attention to the phrase ‘common sense’ in this context, as it has a telling history and highlights these issues. The expression ‘common sense’ derives from the Latin _sensus communis_. It goes back further, to Ancient Greeks and Aristotle, to the notion of an ‘internal sense’ which served to unite or interpret the impressions of the five senses. Aristotle uses the phrase ‘common sense’ to mean the sensory capacity of the soul to combine the perceptual and imaginative. In other words a ‘consensus’ - essentially a faculty of ‘common sense’, which McLuhan explains as conferring consciousness on humans. It is been traditionally assumed that we have five senses (vision, hearing, taste, smell, and touch), but scientists are discovering the senses are not independent, but instead are integrations of many different perceptual fragments. Touch, for instance, includes kinaesthesia - the sense of movement, as well as perception of temperature and pain. And new research shows that synaesthesia - where two or more senses are connected - might be more common than formerly understood. Research into phantom limbs helps explain this. Almost anyone who has had a limb amputated will experience a phantom limb, researchers say. For some, it is also very painful, for many years afterwards.

115 McLuhan, _Understanding Media_, 49
118 McLuhan, _Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man_, 117.
Sometimes people report they cannot control the phantom limb, as it has become stuck in an unnatural position, or that the muscles are frozen in the wrong spot. Using mirrors, researchers in California were able to trick the body of sufferers into controlling the sensations of their lost limb. They created a ‘virtual reality box’, a box lined with mirrors, in which the person inserted their good arm. When they watched it in the mirror, it created the illusion of two hands. When the patient was instructed to move both arms, the visual input told them that in fact both arms were moving.\textsuperscript{121} The patients were astonished and in fact regained control of the phantom, and in many cases the phantom disappeared altogether. As brain researcher Vilayanur Ramachandran stated: ‘... these experiments suggest that there must be a great deal of back and forth interaction between vision and touch.’\textsuperscript{122} Similar medical experiments looking into autoscopia are suggesting that it arises because of a breakdown in integrating the ‘proprioceptive, tactile and visual information with respect to one's own body (disintegration in personal space)’ along with an ‘additional vestibular dysfunction

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{The mirror box experiment.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, 1620.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid, 1622.
leading to disintegration between personal (vestibular) space and extrapersonal (visual) space’. In other words, the sensations of the body and the mind are out of kilter.

In further fascinating experiments carried out by Ramachandran and Eric Lewin Altschuler, the researchers were able to conduct further simple experiments using just two mirrors, to prompt sensations of feeling ‘outside oneself’ in healthy subjects.

They stated:

*We find it interesting that a simple lack of registration of touch and proprioception on the one hand and vision - the inability to see one’s entire face - on the other hand, allows one to so easily stand outside one’s corporeal self.*

Contemporary culture lavishes an enormous amount of attention on the body. But this excessive attention comes from what philosopher Richard Shusterman describes as the corporate, cosmetic, dieting and media industries and focuses on a consciousness of how one’s body appears to others - not the actual bodily feelings, pleasures and capacities of our embodied experience.

*Ideals of bodily appearance impossible for most people ... (are) distracting us from our actual bodily feelings, pleasures and capacities - such relentlessly advertised ideals also blind us to the diversity of ways of improving our embodied experience.*

Feminist author Iris Young pointed out back in 1980 that women are inhibited in a society which conditions them to live in their body as an object, as well as subject. In an article titled *Throwing Like A Girl*, Young argued that in sport, girls often fail to make full use of their body’s spatial and lateral potentialities, and that this is a learned behaviour, not innate to gender. To be gazed at as a body of mere shape and flesh, and not a living manifestation of action and intention, creates a self-consciousness and a

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125 Ibid.
distance from the body. Women tend to more frequently keep their limbs closed around their bodies, because to boldly extend the body outwards invites objectification. Objectification theory is concerned with how the cultural milieu of sexual objectification functions to socialise girls and women to treat themselves as objects to be evaluated based on appearance. Simone de Beauvoir recognised this early on, stating back in 1949:

_The young girl . . . becom[es] prey in order to gain her ends. She becomes an object, and she sees herself as object; she discovers this new aspect of her being with surprise: it seems to her than [sic] she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to exist outside [herself]._ 129

Theorists in objectification theory argue it creates diminished awareness of internal bodily states, and it can be triggered or magnified by situations that accentuate a person’s awareness of observers’ perspectives on her body, such as facing an audience or a camera. In fact, US researchers have set up some fascinating experiments into how it affects performance. In one test they got college students to sample clothing, either swimwear or sweaters. The students tried them on alone in the change-rooms, and for both men and women the swimwear induced a temporary state of self-objectification. They then went on to do a maths test, and the women in the swimwear performed significantly worse than the ones wearing sweaters - while the men did equally well, regardless of what they wore. The same researchers went on to look at women’s sport. They pointed out that behavioural analysis of differences in throwing between girls and boys confirm Young’s original complaint - that boys not only throw further and harder, but they took larger steps and used their entire bodies, not just their arms. These researchers set out to test Young’s hypothesis: to what extent would self-objectification affect throwing performance of teenage girls? They tested 202 high school girls and got them to throw a softball as hard as they could against a distant gym wall. They videotaped them and analysed the physical components of the throwing.

128 Ibid., 270.
131 Ibid.: 84.
They also surveyed them about their own attitudes to their own body and physical attractiveness. Their final summation was that when the adolescent girls viewed their own body as objects, they suffered diminished motor performance.132

If the objectification process implicit in our digital technologies continues at the accelerated rate it has over the past decade - with the hyper consciousness of image and instantaneous temporal feedback of the photographs posted on Facebook, the confrontation with one’s disembodied image in shopping centres and daily life and so on - then the problems of inhibition and split consciousness will eventually extend to both genders.

The sculpture *In Your Face* (fig. 15 & 17) is an examination of the idea of direct feedback continually looping through consciousness. I placed a surveillance video camera in the amputated arm of my figure. The wires for the camera run through the inside of the ceramic figure, which has been fired with a blood-red copper glaze in a reference to blood and the bodily materiality of a human. Instead of a modelled head, I placed a small television set upon the shoulders of the figure, which is linked to the surveillance camera - allowing a real-time reflection of the movements of the viewer. This work references the pioneering work of both Korean-born video artist Nam June Paik (1932-2006), (whose work *TV Buddha 1976* is held at the NSW Art Gallery, which notes in its description of the work that it: ‘brings together the past and present, the old

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132 Ibid.: 92.
and new, the real and illusory’¹³³) and also that of US artist Dan Graham (1942-), whose video work of the late 1960s-1970s explored perceptions, bodies and the temporal experience of space. In Graham’s series of video/performance pieces of the early 1970s, he filmed himself in front of audiences and, using mirrors, used time delay and feedback to provoke new sensory perceptions.¹³⁴ As Birgit Pelzer points out in an essay about Graham’s work of this time: ‘The artist joins, disjoins and inverts two modes of perception: immediate perception and the deferred perception of recorded images and sounds.’¹³⁵

In Graham’s work, he played upon the idea of the spectator seeing an image of themselves as it was recorded eight seconds previously. At the same time, they saw a reflected image in the mirror of themselves, thus seeing the moment and the displacement of time simultaneously. According to Pelzer, the installation highlights the experience of looking/participating in a retroactive video loop.

In my work In Your Face (figs. 15 & 17), I wished to further explore this uncanny disjunct between the passive act of the gaze and the active state of physically moving

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¹³⁵ Ibid.
and how this alters the image and thus reverbs in a feed-back loop. How one’s subjectivity is altered by the perception of oneself, particularly in the form of a figure

Figure 17. Clarissa Regan, *In Your Face*, 2009-2013. Ceramic, surveillance video, TV, wires. 74 x 45 x 47cm.
that has the approximation of a human figure, yet is patently static and constructed. The illusion of a sentient being persists with the recording playing in the face of the figure. What is real? My other concern was to think about the advent of the mobile phone as camera, and how personal this device is, and how easily we slip into the act of recording through having such devices on our bodily person: in our pockets or in our hands. We have always been a recording device, and now we trust the external device as though it were part of us. Yet simply recording what is going on around us never allows us to go past the external surface of things. This work is also full of reversals and a gently humorous look at the human as robot.

It is my contention that a full embodied presence, a direct lived experience and engagement of the body with corporeal materiality is essential to human nature. Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin explains this profound human need articulately in his writings about the culture of the Middle Ages and the notion of the carnivale. The carnivale was a medieval feast time where the usual rigid social norms were turned upside down.

*The experience (the carnivale), opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms.*

The body is presented as grotesque, as Bakhtin says, not severed from its material and bodily roots of the world, but connected to the earth, and to the lower stratum of the body, to the life of the ‘belly and reproductive organs, it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth’. Grotesque realism, enmeshed in the earthy, bawdy humour of the body, also had a regenerating function, he argues.

*Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world

137 Ibid, 21.
The body itself is revealed to be a principle of growth, an ever unfinished, ever creating being which is not separate from the world around it. This robust bawdy humour during carnivale provided a sense of liberation from official seriousness, hierarchies and disrupts ideals of what Bakhtin terms a ‘closed, smooth and impenetrable body’.  

Interestingly, by contrast, think of how most digital devices work with smooth, glossy, closed-off screens and impenetrable insides. They are mass produced containers aimed at perfection, unyielding and invariant. In the classic European fairytale *The Handless Maiden*, the young girl has her hands chopped off after her father, a miller, makes a pact with the Devil to mechanize his mill. She ends up with a pair of silver hands, but is unable to care for her baby with such artificial metallic hands. Jungian author Robert Johnson reads the story as reflecting the wider price society pays for the mechanised, material-based world, by cutting off the feeling values. He says it speaks on a psychological level, as well as a cultural level. ‘…no advancement in civilisation can be made without some such bargain; to argue that civilisation would be better served by staying with the hand-powered mill is to fall into the error of Mahatma Gandhi and Thoreau. But if we make a bargain, we must be awake to its terms.’

French theorist Jean Baudrillard argues myths involving a Pact with the Devil have been the central myth of our society since the Middle Ages, representing a society engaged in the historical and technical process of a domination of Nature.

A number of my sculptures involve a variation on the amputation of *The Handless Maiden*, including the work just discussed previously *In Your Face*, as well as *Plugged In* (fig. 18, 19, 20, 21 & 22) and *A Hard Drive* (fig. 57, 58, 59 & 60). This underlying theme became a recurrent motif in a number of my works, even when I had intended the work to be ostensibly about another myth, such as *Orpheus, Rear View Mirror* (fig. 40 & 41), which is discussed in greater depth in Chapter Four.

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139 Ibid., 317.
Figure 18. Clarissa Regan. *Plugged In*, 2013. Ceramic, radio, wires. 90 x 65 x 40cm.
For Robert Johnson, there is nothing wrong with our mechanical devices per se, but a mechanical view of life is wrong and will extract a ‘feeling price’.

The Handless Maiden has many versions and is also known as The Armless Maiden, The Girl Without Hands and Silver Hands. In the plot of the fairytale, the handless maiden runs away to the forest with her child and spends a period of time gathering her psychic energy. In the Russian version of the tale, the maiden actively heals her silver hands. In that version, the baby falls into a stream and she firstly calls for the servants to help rescue it, but there is no one there. Finally, she plunges her silver hands into the stream to rescue the child, and when she pulls it out, the baby is safe and her hands are restored to flesh and blood. It is in the hands-on, direct and embodied existence; in the acknowledgement of our bodily roots and the regenerative power of the ever-

Figure 19. Clarissa Regan. Plugged In (detail), 2013. Radio.

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Figure 20. Clarissa Regan. Plugged In (installation view, in foreground), 2013. Ceramic, metal, light, radio.

unfinished, ever creating body, that we ground ourselves and escape the vertigo and pathology described by Virilio.

Jungian analyst and author Clarissa Pinkola Estes points out that replacing lost body parts with limbs of silver, gold or wood has a long, long history through the ages. Many myths incorporate magical prostheses. Pinkola Estes equates the hands to power. My work Plugged In features a hand-built ceramic torso and a found object: an antique Radiola radio. The female ceramic form has her eyes closed. I was thinking about the state of disengaging from one’s surroundings while listening to a portable music device like an iPod. How is it possible to split one’s consciousness in such a manner? To provide a contrast, I scaled up the miniature music machine (the iPod-type device) and instead used an old, solid, non-portable radio, complete with glass valves. The inner workings of the analogue machinery are on display on the other side of the object. The ceramic figure is literally plugged in. In the construction of this piece I saw that by plugging herself into the music, by trying to grasp the essence of the music via the machine, her hands are tied; she is fully occupied and caught in the machinery. She has access to the technology of the music via her hands - not her ears. Perhaps at the expense of using her own hands to make music herself. This theme is further explored in Chapter Three, where I discuss the displacement of live singing through the fairy tale The Emperor and the Nightingale. The work Plugged In went through several versions, as I sought to more directly work the aspect of the join between the ceramic form and the wires and technology. Figure 18 shows this earlier version, before I cut off the left arm in order to create a more interwoven and tangled connection. The bird was a reference to the Nightingale itself, with my desire to build a bower-bird type amalgam of odd bits of metal and wires and clay; a fragile, pieced-together and disintegrating constructed creature. I decided to move the bird to another installation. Essentially, what seemed to emerge from this work was a drive, an urge to find the source of the music, almost akin to an addition in the sense of being unsatisfied, trying to grasp at the heart of what the music is all about, but almost as though in a blind alley, seeking it through the valves and wiring.

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144 Ibid, 450.
Figure 21. Clarissa Regan, *Plugged In*, 2012 (earlier version). Ceramic, old radio, wires. 90 x 65 x 40cm.
Figure 22. Clarissa Regan, *Plugged In*, 2012 (closeup). Ceramic, old radio, wires. 90 x 65 x 40cm.