

*HER  
MOVING  
PRESENCE*

Airspace  
5 February 2016 - 20 February 2016.

Curated by Yvette Hamilton and Danica Knezevic



*This project was supported by funding from Marrickville Council.*

Ella Condon  
Fiona Davies  
Kath Fries  
Sylvia Griffin  
Yvette Hamilton  
Melissa Howe  
Danica Knezevic  
Vivienne Linsley  
Sarah Breen Lovett  
Sara Morawetz  
Katy Plummer  
Tamara Voninski

*Her Moving Presence* is an exhibition of moving image work by twelve female artists. The exhibition navigates implied, and actual, presence through the mediums of video, projection, interactivity and screen based performance.

This exhibition is curated by Yvette Hamilton and Danica Knezevic, shown at Airspace, Marrickville, Sydney, Australia. The twelve artists are: Ella Condon, Fiona Davies, Kath Fries, Sylvia Griffin, Yvette Hamilton, Melissa Howe, Danica Knezevic, Vivienne Linsley, Sarah Breen Lovett, Sara Morawetz, Katy Plummer, and Tamara Voninski.

The works presented are reflections of the body as presence, not solely the view of female presence in front of the camera, as the viewed being – but rather, female presence behind the camera, as the viewer/creator. *Her Moving Presence* explores the negotiation of the feminine self through time, space and objects. The reading of this visible and invisible presence allows the construct of an internal dialogue that affirms the understanding of our many selves. The self is determined internally: therefore the conclusion of feminine identity is never specific or absolute.

These curatorial themes are echoed in the possibilities inherent in the moving image medium. A medium dependent on light and constantly in flux, it is itself defined by both the visible and invisible, and the passage of time. Mediating, and indeed defining, the notion of ‘self’ through screen based mediums is almost a ubiquitous part of being visible in the world of a technology driven society. This exhibition looks at the multifarious ways that this manifests from a feminine perspective – from the personal to the political, from gender to cultural issues, from trace to technology.

Yvette Hamilton and Danica Knezevic

## **Her Moving Presence: some thoughts on the moving image, visibility and feminist art.**

**Jacqueline Millner**

Stillness implies a certain level of satisfaction with (or acceptance of) the status quo: to move by contrast implies a quest for (and an acceptance of) change. A moving artwork (beyond the immediate double meaning) implies therefore an object that is contingent, that disavows authoritative status and consciously opens itself out to the world. Such an artwork might affirm the ethics of transience and embody the artist's very hope for change more broadly understood.

### **Visibility and invisibility**

Back in the early 1990s, at the height of practice and debate about the art of identity politics and in the midst of the AIDS crisis, Australian artist Mathew Jones made a particularly striking suite of works: a series of blank canvases, moulded into softy rounded shapes like mid-term pregnant bellies, entitled Silence=Death. Instead of striving for power through visibility and voice — like the activist group ACT UP whose slogan he appropriated for his title — Jones opts out. In a gesture of refusal, he chooses what could be construed as strategic silence, holding the line against capture by public discourse that would only distort and misrepresent his experience as a gay man.

Silence=Death generated heated debate in the art press at the time: one reviewer even suggested that the funding support Jones received could have been better spent on AIDS research! But some fellow travellers applauded his stance, amplifying the discussion about how it was possible, as an artist, to develop an effective politics of representation.

In the decades preceding Jones' work, this key question also subtended the debate among feminist artists and critics who grappled with whether images of women's bodies could ever operate in a manner that countered culturally entrenched sexism. In the wake of powerful critiques of the gaze and visibility, many artists opted for a kind of strategic silence, choosing not to figure the body or specific aspects of feminine experience at all as a challenge to the incapacity of dominant language systems. The title of Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock's 1984 feminist critique of art history beautifully sums up the double standard at the heart of conventional language: *Old Mistresses*.

Critiques of the gaze that drew attention to the tendentious power intrinsic to the act of looking led some artists to explore how to activate the other senses, especially

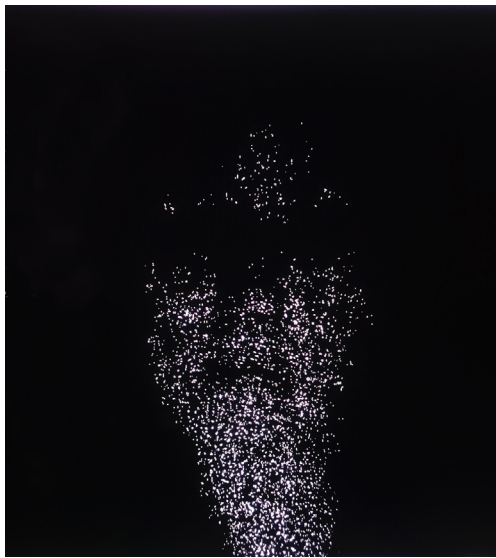
sound and touch but also smell. Such critiques also prompted explorations of other ways to activate viewers beyond simply looking, by engaging them in what we now call 'participatory art'. To question the simple equation of visibility and power, and vision and knowledge, was to potentially open up alternative ways of knowing: to disrupt received wisdom and bestow value on the overlooked. To some extent, this drive to find new ways of creating and new languages of expression is at the heart of the modernist avant-garde, but more specifically the oscillations between silence and invisibility and their inverses have continued to underpin artistic practices concerned with issues of representation, identity and empowerment.

## **Video as feminist tool.**

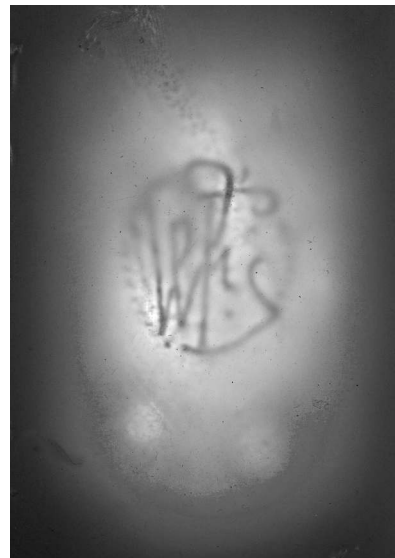
When the Sony Portapak — the first mass marketed video camera — burst onto the art scene in the late 1960s, it provided a new medium apposite to the radical politics of the time. From the beginning, video art was understood as anti-establishment. Unlike other visual arts media, it was forged in the crucible of contemporary, rather than modern, classical or ancient, art. It had no tradition so was not beholden to it. It had no canon so could start from scratch. It had no critical discourse so was not accountable to it. Video art emerged at that point when modernism was short circuited by minimalism and conceptual art and as such was perfectly placed to carry the mantle of the moment, the dematerialization of art. Together with performance, video had a privileged relationship with real time events and experience, what American art historian Kristine Stiles argues allows them to 'augment metaphor with metonymy', that is, to move art from representations that rely on 'is not' but 'is like', to 'is like' and 'is directly connected'. Metonymy undermines the traditional separation of the artwork from what it represents, such that the mundane and the personal can be re-imagined in very direct ways through video. Video offered realist aesthetics, was cheap and easy to use, and could instantaneously record and transmit images. These attributes lent themselves readily to the aspirations of social transformation through activist art, while also facilitating self-reflexive experimental work, features that made video particularly appealing to women. No tradition, so perfect to craft new ways of knowing; audio and visual, so perfect to extend the sensory experience of art; both social and individual, so perfect to explore the feminist mantra that the personal is political. Consequently, many of the pioneers of video were women (Joan Jonas, Jill Scott, Martha Rosler and Dara Birnbaum to name a few), a critical tradition that carries on into the contemporary despite the tendency to spectacle and techie aesthetics that characterizes the development of video art since the 70s.

## Contemporary interventions: Her Moving Presence

The artists in *Her Moving Presence* foreground the relevance of questions the moving image raises as a medium — permanence and ephemerality, stasis and change, visibility and invisibility, immutability and interaction — to social and personal issues, in particular the feminine experience. They share an interest in the way the moving image shapes our identities and our relationship to nature, place and other people, particularly in our era of ubiquitous screens and a culture of obsessive self-surveillance. They also share a desire to take a fresh look at assumptions about the moving image's role as stand-in for the real. Many of these artists grapple with the question of visibility as a strategy; some seek to activate the other senses through the moving image; some problematize the still image; some interrogate how different kinds of gazes yield different knowledges; and others emphasise the moving image's reliance on the viewer's active involvement.



*Moving Portrait*, 2016. Yvette Hamilton.

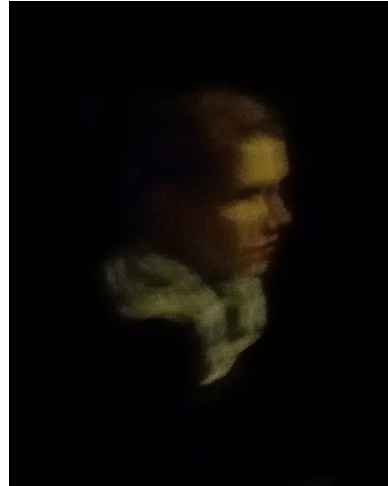


*Absent Present*, 2014. Sylvia Griffin.

Yvette Hamilton's and Sylvia Griffin's work reminds us of the mutual agency of image and viewer. Hamilton's *Moving Portrait* captures a likeness of its viewer that vanishes if that viewer assumes the traditional passive pose of spectatorship, while in Griffin's *Absent Present*, a projection of the artist's mother's dowry linen flickers in and out of view as bodies intercept the passage of light. The oscillation between still and moving image also underpins the work of Tamara Voninski and Melissa Howe; in *Crossing*, Howe returns to the proto-film dissection of movement by Muybridge and Marey, while in Voninski's *La Mere de la Mer*, photography and film blur.



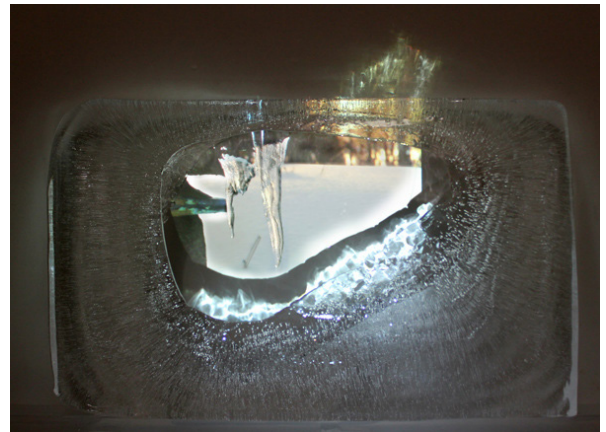
*La Mère de la Mer*, 2016. Tamara Voninski.



*The Crossing*, 2016. Melissa Howe.



*Cross Pollination*, 2016. Vivienne Linsley.



*Handheld-melting*, 2015-2016. Kath Fries.

Vivienne Linsley and Kath Fries explore the relationship of visual documentation to sensation, especially the haptic sense. Fries' videos give us a real time, first person perspective on the bodily experience of natural processes, while Linsley's *Cross Pollination* amplifies our sensual access to interpersonal exchanges that usually remain beyond our perception.



*Tracing Moonlight*, 2015. Ella Condon.



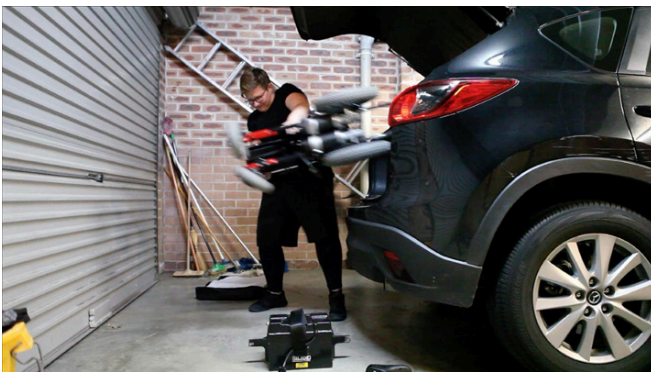
*Blood on Silk: Bleeding Out*, 2016.  
Fiona Davies





*Meditations on Sadness*, 2015. Sara Morawetz.

What happens when the moving image renders the invisible visible, and the significance of this to scientific scopic regimes, informs the work of Ella Condon and Fiona Davies. Condon's *Tracing Moonlight* results from her collaboration with astronomers at the Sydney Conservatory, part of her ongoing experimentation with the basic building blocks of the photographic image. Davies' *Blood on Silk: Bleeding Out* scrutinises the medical gaze — from the microscope to the total surveillance of intensive care — and its infiltration of our embodied experience. Sara Morawetz is also fascinated by the intersection of artistic and scientific ways of seeing, subjecting profound personal emotions to empirical observation and 'objective' documentation.



*The Invisible Agent*, 2015. Danica Knezevic.



*Lay, Trace, Triple*, 2016.  
Sarah Breen Lovett.

How to document the self in ways that counter prevailing cultural expectations (such as the curating of identity demanded by social media) is also explored in different ways in the work of Danica Knezevic, Sarah Breen Lovett and Katy B Plummer. Knezevic's

Invisible Agent grants us insight into the oft-unremarked labour of carers, riffing at the same time on the social invisibility of wheelchair users and the visual conventions of performance art. In Lay, Trace, Triple, Lovett homes in on the traces of self in landscape to reflect on the relationship between place and identity. And in SUFFRAGIST, Plummer imagines herself as a zombie suffragist in a hilarious send up of the way historical images are coopted into power-serving narratives.



*SUFFRAGIST*, 2015. Katy B Plummer.

*Her Moving Presence*, through its focus on the moving image and female experience, offers compelling contemporary explorations of the links between vision, visibility, and knowledge. Contextualising this work in relation to the feminist roots of video art and the historical debates on the politics of representation underlines how significant these questions remain.

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