Un/comfortable Bodies: 
Collaborative Performance, Embodiment, and Materiality in the  
Sensorial Field of Clay 

Fiona Fell Uncomfortable Partners (digital print) 2018 

An Exegesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy 

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Supervised by Dr Bill Platz and Dr Laini Burton 2018
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signed---------------------------------------------------------------

Fiona Fell
Abstract

This exegesis proposes art as an in/hospitable space for female embodiment, drawing on manifestations of the uncanny, the shadow, and the ghostly, for which theoretical support is found in new feminist, posthumanist, and new materialist discourses. Research for this exegesis has aimed to archive and reimagine two decades of ceramic figurative sculpture practice as well as establish a new language for my practice through an expanded field of material enquiry. Attention to the sensorial field of clay is an intuitive, as well as logical step in praxis. It recasts the perception of what the ‘traditional medium’ of ceramics may have to offer, in an era in which the system of art is becoming increasingly virtual. These investigations merge an intuitive understanding of clay with medical scanning technologies, video making, studio logic, and spatial investigations. The additional use of performance, collaboration, and interdisciplinary processes has destabilised and blurred the discrete, unyielding characteristics of the ceramic canon. This allows for an expansion of the language of art’s matter beyond the thin, opaque, impenetrable surface of fired and glazed clay. Instead, porosity, as the interpenetration and interconnection between the inside and the outside of the artist’s body, has created a new understanding of female embodiment and the nature of materiality in art making.
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Introduction: Stretching My Practice’s Limits

Research Focus

I have grounded my artistic practice in traditional figurative ceramic sculpture, with a career spanning 20 years of solo and group projects and exhibitions. I have also reflected on my profession in residencies nationally as well as abroad, achieving funding to conduct research in art institutions across Australia, Asia, Europe, and North America. Finally, yet importantly, I have passed on my experience and professional concerns by teaching at the university level for two decades. During that period, my creative activity has been based in, challenged by, and altered through academe, as it has been developed within a research paradigm that combines practice, experiment, investigation, reflection, and collaboration beyond the traditional limits of my craft. A practice-led, collaborative, and interdisciplinary approach has allowed me to explore avenues in my art conception and practice in an oft-uncanny process that has replaced familiar spaces with new, unexplored territory and led to unexpected outcomes and results. Realms that once seemed extraneous to my art have densified, taken shape, and materialised as new, exciting spaces of exploration, eccentric to known venues in ceramics but ground-breaking and productive in their cross-fertilisation. The interdisciplinary initiative has recast my notion of creativity, materiality, embodiment, and authorship in innovating ways, and this has similarly affected my partners in collaboration. Intriguingly, what seems to be an incongruous relationship between new media and the hand-made has re-ignited my interest in the material of clay, the making of forms, and how the artist’s and artistic body operate in a mutual creative flux. All these collaborative interventions so far have forged new connections and relationships between traditional modes of practice and emerging interdisciplinary engagement, in which exciting new work flows from the hybridised shadows of old, trodden artistic paths. My trajectory is therefore in line with art philosopher Mario Perniola’s claim that ‘the entire vicissitudes of contemporary
art can be interpreted as a transgression of frontiers and as an extraordinary widening of its territory.”¹

While my research originates in the platform of an autonomous art discipline, my focus has shifted from the idea of the mere intervention into, and subversion of, traditional ceramics through interdisciplinary collaboration to an investigation of how constricting, essentialist notions of the embodiment and materiality of the female artist and her artwork may be questioned and deconstructed through such practices. My practice has expanded into a multidisciplinary study of performative practices that are constitutive of new identities. As Judith Butler succinctly puts it, to understand identity as a signifying practice means to see it not as an essence but as a product of language. Its articulation is strategically constituted through agency, which in its turn operates through the repetition of an event rather than its epistemological invention or founding. Butler assigns a subversive quality to agency because repetition implies ‘the possibility of variation,’ hence:

Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalised performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself.²

The shifty imprint of the performative has opened up new spaces in my current genre and industry whereby the confining skin of ceramic sculpture can be broken through in multiple, expansive ways and can enter in a productive dialogue and exchange with the artist’s body. While hylomorphic approaches continue to position matter as a passive substance to be shaped by the artist(s) in service of linguistic discourse, performative and posthumanist³ new materialist approaches to collaboration may effectively disrupt the humanist ontologies that still reign in the visual arts.

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¹ Perniola 2004a: 47.
² Butler 1990: 146.
³ I use posthumanist in the sense of breaking away from the androcentric view of the universe.
The field of interdisciplinary investigation known as new materialism came into being at the beginning of the twenty-first century as a response to the deconstructionist turn of the humanities and social sciences of the 1980s and 1990s, which had favoured discursive approximations to reality as Judith Butler’s. Captained by scholars such as Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Jane Bennett, Vicki Kirby, and Manuel DeLanda, new materialism promotes a post-deconstructionist, ontological return to a material and embodied understanding of the Real. Yet, it keeps the theoretical advances that deconstruction has provided in terms of understanding and subverting the power relations that affect our interpretation of the world we live in while claiming that matter and embodiment have an existence and agency beyond discourse. New materialist approaches share with deconstruction that they reject the discrete binary divisions between nature and nurture/culture, human and non-human, agent and patient, dynamic and static etc. that enthrone the humanist—anthropocentric approach to investigation but they also refuse the re-inscription of deconstruction’s relativist paradigm as another universalist, totalising understanding of reality that ultimately returns the human to the centre and control of the universe.5 What this means for me as an artist is that I can no longer look upon my artwork as an independent entity that exists outside my own embodiment as if it were called into being through the free engagement of my ‘independent’ will and action of my body—as the product of the humanist ontologies that traditionally oppose art maker and work of art, subject and object, agent and patient, sentence and non-sentence etc.. Rather, art exists in the dialogue between my own and art’s embodiment, in an ongoing process and state of flux that Karen Barad6 has analysed as “intra-action”; on this view, art and artist act as an interdependent non-hierarchical corpus or ‘body of art’ and make and remake each other in the process of the artist and art’s becoming. Such a performative new materialist approach may be responsive to the specificity of material entanglements as it is enacted within an ecology of studio practices, and works towards collaboration as a transversal practice of ‘becoming a work of art’. Thus, I use collaboration with practices, techniques, and disciplines alien to pure ceramics and ceramic sculpture-making to extend the possibilities of these new findings and explore the rich inner dialogue of the creating and created body of (the) art(ist) in a state of flux.

5 See also Yi Sencindiver 2017.
The question I will aim to answer through my research is:

How does interdisciplinary collaboration with scanning, visualisation, and recording technologies open up new forms and spaces of creative practice and performance in ceramic sculpture and how does this impact on the artist’s body and her body of art?

**Antecedents and Research Methodology**

Spanning two decades my work to date has dealt with issues integral to the genre of figuration in ceramics in both national and international arenas. Previous research encompasses the relationship between the body and space engaging architectural metaphors and treating the body as a psychological site. Study into the nature of the figurine and the cultural significance of dolls has facilitated my ongoing rapport with the votive figure and the uncanny life of inanimate figurative objects. The abundant feminist theory relating to the body and its politics has provided valuable resources underpinning this research, in particular, that of Hélène Cixous, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, and Rosalind Krauss. Collaborative, interdisciplinary initiative and research have recast my notion of creativity, materiality, embodiment, and authorship in innovating ways, and has similarly affected my partners in interdisciplinary collaboration. Consequently, the traditional notion of the artist working in isolation in her ivory tower bent upon singular outcomes, has lost importance, while team effort and cross-fertilisation have become central in the process of making, where the added value and knowledge generated, appear greater than the sum of the individual, collaborating parts.

Over the past decade, I have presented and published papers on the topic of collaboration and traced the emergence of interdisciplinary activity within ceramics practice, ceramics training, and ceramic research. Through cross-examining my own work, I have employed the autonomous art form of ceramics as a platform into a multidisciplinary study of performative practices in order to answer questions relevant to my current genre and industry. This includes questioning what new creative and methodological issues are brought up by the adoption of the term ‘collaboration’; whether there is an alternative terminology we can develop around the interplay

7 See Works Cited.
of deconstructive and subversive behaviour; how collaboration challenges the context of choice and our reading of ceramics history; whether collaboration in ceramics provides us with a new vantage point from which to explore ceramic process and production; and how I can, as an autonomous practitioner, be engaged in collaborative practices to inform my work and return to a more intimate relationship with both materiality and contextual identity.

Through the process of both archiving and constructing a series of collaborations between figurative ceramic sculpture and artists working in performance, drawing, animation, digital art, video, and installation work, this research aims to explore and rewrite the underpinnings of ceramic sculptural design. Questioning the embodiment and materiality of the artwork, these subversive interventions will combine traditional techniques, unconventional, and state-of-the-art technologies that reflect critical exchange within the context of contemporary art practice and provide a platform for creative outcomes that contribute to broadening the understanding of ceramics as an art practice of ongoing relevance in contemporary art.

I have therefore developed a significant body of studio work through processes of experimentation, interdisciplinary investigations, and material investigations that shape the basis of my PhD exhibition. Critiques with supervisors, colleagues, and visiting artists have assisted in the process of refinement and studio directions. Works in progress have been exhibited to get feedback on installation ideas and papers have been published. I have employed a broad range of methodologies and processes to arrive at my research findings:

- Literature review and analysis of key texts and their findings.
- Archiving past collaborative projects and packaging conclusions.
- Establishing, through experimentation and studio research, effective means by which to communicate continuous materiality ‘from which objects unfold in a perpetual flow of mutation’.

I see clay as the matter that mutates in a never-ending process of adaptation to changing contexts; this material will act as the axis point of all the collaborations.

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8 Reid quoted in Weaver 2007, n.p.
• Re-interpreting material outcomes.
• Critical analysis of works produced by artists in response to similar colliding disciplinary practices in their research.

Significant texts that have been examined to investigate the above topics include among others, Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1968); Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990); Cixous’s ‘Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud’s *Das Unheimliche (The ‘Uncanny’)’ (1976); Derrida’s ‘Hostipitality’ (2000); Freud’s *The Uncanny* (1919); Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (2005); Perniola’s *Art and Its Shadow* (2004); Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007) and her ‘Posthumanist performativity: toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter’ (2003); Amelia Jones’s ‘Material Traces: Performativity, Artistic ‘Work,’ and New Concepts of Agency’ (2015); Iris van der Tuin’s ‘On the Mode of Invention of Creative Research: Onto-Epistemology’ (2014); and Rosi Braidotti’s *The Posthuman* (2013).9

The structure of this PhD project is provided by the framework of collaborative practice-based research as it engages critically with artistic exchange, the collision of art and science in imaging technology, and the physical and practical constraints of multidisciplinary visual practice. The methodologies I have engaged with move between performative and practice-led research. I aim to foster a culture of collaboration across disciplinary areas and the academic community, both national and international, and to confront the discomforts and dilemmas this exposure to other professional and cultural contexts may generate in my own practice as a positive, critical contribution to the creative process. In practice-led research, the two roles of practitioner and researcher are intertwined. Anke Coumans explains the scope of practice-led research as follows:

> Within practice-led research it is the design process moving from problem to solution that is the point of departure for the rhetoric research direction of the thesis … The research direction of an artist/designer—other than the art and design process—is a transparent

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9 See Works Cited
process in which conscious steps are taken, in which knowledge is used, or knowledge is searched for and articulated in the process … The artist/designer, therefore, must also demonstrate that he [sic] possesses sufficient knowledge to justify the choices he [sic] has made.¹⁰

And Mandy Rogerson observes that:

‘Practice as research, in any disciplinary area, privileges action as a methodological imperative’ (Sjoberg & Hughes, n.d.). As such, it offers a process in which practical knowledge is recognised as a foundation from which to develop new knowledge through research practices which synthesise theoretical and bodily investigation.¹¹

I intend to expand upon this dynamic as I move through a number of interdisciplinary collaborations marked with creative outcomes. A malleable interdisciplinary approach will focus on the activation and dematerialisation of the object through collaborative, performative, and practice-based research methodologies. Claire Bishop writes of interdisciplinary collaboration:

The best collaborative practices of the past ten years address this contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention and reflect on this antinomy both in the structure of the work and in the conditions of its reception. It is to this art—however uncomfortable, exploitative, or confusing it may first appear—that we must turn for an alternative to the well-intentioned homilies that today pass for critical discourse on social collaboration. These homilies unwittingly push us towards a platonic regime in which art is valued for its truthfulness and educational efficacy rather than inviting us … to confront darker, more painfully complicated considerations of our predicament.¹²

It is these darker considerations—the uncanny shadow areas of our human embodiment—I mean to investigate when inserting my sculpture into the interdisciplinary environment of collaboration using scanning, video recording, and installation work.

This exegesis reports on the collaborative, interdisciplinary processes of research and creation grounding my extended practice, which has moved beyond an emphasis on the autonomy of the hand-crafted or sculpted object to an exploration of a porous, interpenetrating, and interconnected internal and external topography, promiscuously spilling over into, and fertilising other disciplines and back. It situates my art practice within postmodern discourses of collaborative, interdisciplinary, practice-led research, and establishes how these affect female embodiment and materiality, addressing important and salient contemporary currents such as new materialism, posthumanism, and new feminism. Chapter 1 traces the beginnings of my art practice in the ceramic tradition linking art theory and practice. It ventures into the uncanny as a basic concern in my earlier work. Chapter 2 highlights the importance medical scanning and imaging technologies have acquired within my art practice to lay bare the spectral interiors of ceramic sculpture, dedicating itself to the changing nature of the gaze. Here I provide an assessment of inspirational artists and thinkers in my field of interest and position myself as well as address my collaborations with Lyndall Adams and Caroline Ainsworth. As a key episode in my recent artistic development, it addresses the connections between scanning, the hospital space and hospitality, as well as the uncanny, the ghostly, and the shadow. Chapter 3 concentrates on the interplay between the artist’s body and the work of art in video performance recordings, adding subjectivity and embodiment to the artistic equation, focusing on my virtual and installation work with the filmmaker Raimond de Weerdt, linguist and poet Maarten Renes, painter Kellie O’Dempsey, sculptor-designer André Martus, new-media artist Grayson Cooke, musician Matt Hill, and poet Lynda Hawryluk. Chapter 4 deals with the work that accompanies this exegesis in exhibition form, which is heavily influenced by the deluge that hit Lismore in an irony of fate on April Fools 2017 and annihilated the PhD work I had in preparation in my studio. After the initial shock, this destruction turned into a blessing in disguise, a ‘watershed’ moment that dissolved my previous efforts and put human agency on the art work and vice-versa in a new materialist and posthuman(ist) perspective. In the Conclusion, I pull the previous threads together; consider how embodiment and materiality unpack through collaboration and
interdisciplinarity; and how the merger of both approaches has changed the meaning of my art practice and work.
Chapter 1: Clay Sculpture’s Uncanny Limits

I think that to realize an anxiety attack and to resolve it is the highest form of existence...
—Louise Bourgeois, Diary 1957

This chapter looks into my individual sculptural practice and how it sowed the seeds for later, collaborative interdisciplinary initiatives and efforts. Here I trace how my individual work’s susceptibility to the defamiliarizing revelation of inner worlds of turmoil, fear, and trauma naturally led to a blurring of the discrete borders between disciplines and so to a collaborative, interdisciplinary, practice-led approach. Working with the heavy but ductile malleability of clay has given me the material solidity and flexibility to hold myself together and find my centre as a woman and creator, as well as the possibility to make room for all those dreamlike desires, nightmarish fears, and ensuing traumas that seem to be the ever-present, undesired accompaniment of any upbringing and socialisation, whether parents and kin meant and did well or not. Key in the understanding of my work is the manifestation of the uncanny as in the Indefinite Densities exhibition, which I highlight below. The ensuing discussion of its deconstructive properties will lay the groundwork for subsequent developments in both my art’s and my own self-perception as a female artist.

Indefinite Densities

This solo show took place at Watters Gallery, Sydney, from 23 October to 9 November 2013, and marked my move to a new home, which incorporates, for the first time, a working space where my pieces originate and come to life. My sculptures personify my fears and desires, and trace the vicissitudes of my constant internal dialogue, assessing as well as rendering my place in
life. They are my offspring, my children, my ‘little people’, imbued with their own emotions, fears, wishes and demands. In Classical times, Plutarch recognises statues may be able to ‘… give out a sound which resembles a groan or a sigh,’ but his explanation is scientific, arguing that this phenomenon ‘is caused by a fracture or splitting of the particles of which they may be composed, and produces a louder noise if it takes place inside.’ He denies statues and figurines could be animated and speak, as even the pagan gods need to incorporate into human flesh and bone to produce a voice of their own.\(^{13}\) In other words, it would be against nature for a lifeless object to be imbued with humanity and develop a relationship with wo/man beyond the presumed stillness of matter. In a study of the artificial body in art and fashion, Adam Geczy responds to Plutarch that our relationship to the world is nowadays more unnatural than ever\(^ {14}\) and so opens up a realm of uncanny embodiment, in which still matter may come alive. My statues and figurines have come alive as ‘little people’ in the studio space in the process of their making, as clay is being modelled until it hardens out into fixed matter in the shifting dialogue between creator and creation. They are the product of the close, intense physical and emotional connection between means and form in my new studio environment, now integrated into my home in Lismore. Immersion in the studio can be a terrifying treat. At times entering my studio is like visiting a casualty ward, with body parts of the surrogate patients, fighting to be whole, struggling for a voice. When the voices become strong enough, they take on their own momentum and suggest their own visiting hours. ‘Finish me’, they say, ‘before I am lost, for at any given moment everything you know may be suddenly taken away’. Having my studio at home has triggered a different kind of relationship with my sculpture, in which the ‘odd visit downstairs’ becomes an alternative working moment and space that imposes itself on regulated and scheduled studio hours, as my figures look and speak back to me and call me down from my domestic affairs. Living and working space converge and allow me to turn my sculpture, even more so than before, into a reflection on my own embodied experience in the most intimate of ways while being guided by their voices. My figurative clay sculptures have always explored the psychological depths of the human body through the uncanny manifestation of emotions on the thin skin outside, be it through sheer form, deformation, or the colour and tactile quality of their glazing. My figures stand, lie down, bend forward or back, open up their insides, meld and

\(^{13}\) 1965: 50, quoted in Geczy 2017: 1

\(^{14}\) 2017: 1.
merge, or fade away and break up but always face up to a world beyond tangible reality, where their fixation and display into their final form poises them in the border area of life and death and so recall the tensions that spawned them.

Art critic Jonathan Lethem and scan artist David Meisel (2011) write in relation to scan technology that ‘To see the insides and the outsides of things at once [is] to expose the falsehood of their division into a binary system’. It is easy to see that the process of looking beyond the skin frees us from the complacency of the exterior form and surface—it avoids what one might call ‘contemplacency’, a quiet, meek acceptation of reality ‘as it is’ without looking at and seeing the discursive relations between knowledge, language and power that inform it. Even before I started using scan technology, my artistic output, though constructivist in nature at that time, always expressed an emotional turmoil barely contained by its still clay skin, writing repressed areas of the Self back onto the sculptured surfaces and so questioning and taking apart figurative truth and authenticity. In a *Craft Australia* issue, I wrote:

> Making figurative sculpture for me is a constant negotiation of changeable terrain, sometimes under a deluge of unpredictable forces and natural disasters. Within each work, when following the material process of manipulating clay through to vitrification and the various surface treatments employed, I attempt to capture a particular poetic moment. This moment is often not a pleasurable moment but an uncomfortable strangeness that forms a voice of its own and has an urgency to be told.

I would describe my individual work as an emotional representation of the body adhering to basic sculptural concerns of base, figure, and extension. When I speak of the body as a subject, I mean this in the widest possible sense: I talk of embodiment and substance, memory and sensation, and feelings that extend beyond our usual senses. These bodies adhere to memory and are a source of agency and empowerment, but they also harbour discontent, regret, and retribution, where both the corporeal and the metaphysical are in dialogue. This approach has

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15 Lethem, and Meisel 2011.  
17 Fell 2011: 2.
essentially remained present in my work, although my collaborative activities have modified it, as have the new materialist realisation that the art work is in a constant flux of being created and creating itself in its interaction—or ‘intra-action’ as Karen Barad puts it\(^\text{18}\)—with the artist’s body.

**Deconstructing the Freudian Uncanny**

The revelation of disturbing inner worlds in my sculptural output have marked me as ‘a different kind of potter’, or rather, by adding an ‘extra’ (a concept I will develop subsequently), they have made me different from a potter. These disturbing inner worlds have always informed my process of artistic creation, beating underneath the smooth surfaces of my clay sculptures. Sigmund Freud’s investigation of the uncanny, or das Unheimliche, as existential dis-ease (we could say, *Weltschmerz*)\(^\text{19}\) as expressed in modern art is therefore relevant to my artistic project. Freud’s study of the uncanny is an analysis on the interface of psychology and aesthetics, fuelled by the existential despair and loss that surfaced in art after the First World War in the wake of *Late Empire*.\(^\text{20}\) He defines the uncanny as a disturbing space of experience where what is homely and known (‘canny’\(^\text{21}\)) becomes unhomely and so discomforting (‘uncanny’) by the revelation of knowledge that has been hidden and repressed.\(^\text{22}\)

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\(^{18}\) Barad 2003: 814.

\(^{19}\) *Weltschmerz* is a feeling of world weariness or melancholy.

\(^{20}\) *Late Empire* refers to the period of time when the European empires were in decline, most notably the British Empire towards the end of Queen Victoria’s reign. World Wars I and II can be explained as resulting from previous colonial conflict among the European powers, and decolonisation took full shape as of 1945, which fixes the period of Late Empire to the last quarter of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

\(^{21}\) *can* (v.1). Old English 1st & 3rd person singular present indicative of *cunnan* ‘know, have power to, be able,’ (also ‘to have carnal knowledge’), from Proto-Germanic *kunnan* ‘to be mentally able, to have learned’ (source also of Old Norse *kenna* ‘to know, make known,’ Old Frisian *kanna* ‘to recognize, admit,’ German *kennen* ‘to know,’ Gothic *kannjan* ‘to make known’), from PIE root *gno- ‘to know.’ *canny* (adj.) 1630s, Scottish and northern English formation from *can* (v.1) in its sense of ‘know how to,’ + -y (2). ‘Knowing,’ hence, ‘careful.’ A doublet of *cunning* that flowed into distinct senses. (See Works Cited: ‘can’)

\(^{22}\) Freud (1919)1953: 219-52.
Freud bases his analysis of the particular quality of feeling aroused by the uncanny on the way that it merges opposites, and so blurs meaning. In his study, Freud shows that das Unheimliche and das Heimliche are opposites, but that each evolves towards the other and eventually merges. Freud’s semantic analysis of the uncanny establishes that Heimlich and Unheimlich are opposite ends of a spectrum, and as we move from the former to the latter, we gain a deeper sense of ambivalence and unease. Once established that the uncanny encompasses all that ‘ought to have
remained secret and hidden but has come to light.’ Freud develops the term psychoanalytically using his disciple Otto Rank’s work on the double, as nothing is more homely and yet unhomely and frightening than the alter-ego, who is, indeed, too close for comfort. Glossed as the look-alike in appearance/behaviour or ‘the uncanny harbinger of death’—a mirror image, a shadow, a guardian spirit or a ghost—the double constitutes a metaphor for our capacity of self-observation, self-criticism, and self-censorship. Essentially, the uncanny is not what is unknown to us but what is suppressed from our material reality; in other words, what defines the uncanny is not an absence, but a hidden presence—potentially harmful knowledge that is damaging when coming to light, which makes its manifestation utterly unsettling—which is the consequence of unassimilated childhood trauma in Freud’s conception. Therefore, the particular notion of fear and disturbance encapsulated in the uncanny is not the defamiliarizing encounter with what has been repressed from an exterior reality but inside the Self. This is to say, the uncanny is already canny, and the unhomely is already part of the homely, by which the concept folds back on itself and undercuts binary oppositions. One can understand the uncanny as a marginal or liminal concept that reveals a disturbance or gap in the discursive definition of reality, as we believe to perceive it. It is, in fact, a grey zone, a liminal, non-prototypical area where discrete conceptual borders blur and definitions break down, and yet also a space where new meanings may be created. In Freud’s analysis, the uncanny may either feed back into the maintenance or rupture of the status quo—it would be the psychiatrist’s task to procure the former, thus inscribing therapeutical intervention as politically-charged, discursive action.

As it is, one would do well to understand to what extent Freud’s account of the uncanny is biased despite its formal brilliance. Freud spoke from a specific, Central European, male, middle-class position in Late Empire, which allowed and perhaps forced him to gloss over the contemporary race, class, and gender binaries that kept late-Imperial European civilisation in place both at home and abroad. Consequently, his theorisation of trauma was purely psychological and rooted in the interpretation of classical myth and folktales—oblivious to the material conditions that inform trauma. While praise is due for the sophisticated and creative ways in which he explored

the diseased human mind, his theorisation of trauma is mostly abandoned nowadays. Instead, attention has been drawn to the socio-historic and geographical locatedness of his theories, and how they connect to race, class, and gender oppression.

It is in this sense important to revisit Marxist constructions of material reality and the ideological apparatus that supports it. Discourses of race, class, and gender construct rather than render the real and present these constructions as natural, unchangeable, and essentially good. Yet as an interpretation rather than a reflection of material reality, they must always be partial and incomplete because they are employed in the service of empowered groups. What cannot discursively incorporate into the real, what is suppressed from it makes us realize that on the one hand, materiality exists independently from and beyond the ontological pretensions of language, and that on the other hand, the solid, essentialist appearance of matter becomes unsteady or wavers as the product of language. The Neo-Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek\(^\text{26}\) addresses labour/class issues in Freud’s conception of the uncanny by arguing that no ideology is capable of grasping and encompassing the whole of reality, to the effect that what remains discursively unvoiced haunts the real relentlessly and endlessly in spectral form and turns life into a discomforting experience. Rather than explaining the shape of the real in psychological terms only, as Freud would, Žižek deems the material conditions of oppression as represented in labour as a class division determinant for the shape of reality. Thus, he theorises how the im/possibility for the spectral to incorporate materially into the real is intimately bound up with the traumatic appearance of the uncanny—in fact, the uncanny represents precisely those elements of material reality that are discursively hidden from it yet were always already ‘there’. He takes his cue from Derrida, who in *Spectres of Marx* argues that resurgent spectral materiality takes the shape of the undead ghost that comes from the past and attempts to incorporate into the future as the *revenant*.\(^\text{27}\) The ghost is a paradoxical non/incorporation into our reality and its most powerful figurative representation of our fear of death, which takes our discussion of material being into the crucible of life and death—the principle of pro/creation, the male and the female, de- and re-incorporation.

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\(^{26}\) Žižek 1994: 1-33.

Key here is Hélène Cixous, whose feminist critique of Freud’s masculinist interpretation of the uncanny links the concept’s lack of prototypicality to non-representation and non-signification outside patriarchal rule. She points out that:

… the concept is without nucleus: the Unheimliche presents itself, first of all, only on the fringe of something else. Freud relates it to other concepts which resemble it (fright, fear, anguish): it is a unit of the “family” but it is not really a member of the family … The indefiniteness is part and parcel of the “concept”.

Cixous deconstructs Freud’s gender preconceptions in his analysis of the popular story of ‘The Sandman’, which forms the backbone of his reading of the uncanny. E.T.A. Hoffman’s famous tale, a disquieting story about the repetitive resurgence of a disturbing childhood memory which centres on an imaginary haunting character reputed to tear out children’s eyes, is interpreted by Freud in Oedipal terms, favouring the patriarchal. As Oedipus has been figuratively blind about the true, incestual nature of the love and death triangle he is involved in, his punishment for transgressing the incest taboo aptly translates to a physical loss of sight. The latter, in Freud’s words, is only “a mitigated form of the punishment of castration—the only punishment that was adequate for him by the lex talionis.”

In Hoffman’s tale, several mother figures appear whom its protagonist Nathaniel is in love with—notably the uncanny automaton Olympia—but projections of the Sandman, the irascible alter-ego of the otherwise gentle father, consequently block the consummation of what Freud identifies as Nathaniel’s incestuous wishes. Nathaniel ends up killing the father figure and punishes himself by precipitating himself to his own end; through his death, the Oedipal sequence turns from virtual to factual blindness and thus: to castration.

30 E.T.A. Hoffman lived from 1776 to 1822. His fiction, which combined the grotesque and the supernatural with psychological realism, was very influential on the German Romantic movement. Freud calls him “the unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature” (1953: 233).
31 Freud 1953: 231.
But as Cixous observes, Freud highlights the role of the Sand-Man (the male principle) and de-emphasizes the role of Olympia (the female principle) in the production of the story’s uncanny effect.33 Thus, Cixous concludes that Freud is the victim of his own gender-conditioning: in his insistence on rationalizing Nathaniel’s behaviour, his “entire analysis of the Unheimliche is characterized … by [his] resistance to castration and its effectuality.”34 What Freud’s analysis presents as the “surprising story’ … of the birth and evolution of the double, the product and hiding-place of castration” in fact obscures that “[a]s ‘an anticipatory sign’ the uncanny alludes to the death pulse,” to the dissolution of life.35

Cixous takes the uncanny into the realm of sexual signification, but only to relinquish and blur gender binaries in the final analysis. In her analysis, the Heimliche links to the maternal and the Unheimliche to the paternal principle, but their ambiguous circulation through each other evoke “the figure of the androgyne. The word joins itself, again, and the Heimliche and Unheimliche pair off.”36 While this merger suggests the re/productive principle embodied in ‘little death’, this sexual metaphor also explains “[w]hy … the maternal landscape, the heimisch, and the familiar become so disquieting.” Paradoxically, the obliteration of separations, barriers and limits in the realisation of our desires presupposes death:

“All of that which overcomes, shortens, economizes, and assures satisfaction appears to affirm the life forces. All of that has another face turned toward death which is the detour of life. The abbreviating effect which affirms life asserts death.”37

In other words, death blurs boundaries and life re/creates itself in death’s non-signification. Cixous shows Freud’s interpretation to be gender-biased regarding the deeper issues of incest and taboo in the tale and so to be in favour of the return to the patriarchal norm after suffering and discomfort. Cixous’ gendered critique locates the uncanny as the harbinger of death, because “as a changing sign, [the uncanny] passes from the affirmation of survival to the announcement of

33 Cixous 1976: 533.
34 Cixous 1976: 535
36 Cixous 1976: 530.
death.” At the same time, it produces the figure of the un-dead double as a “ghostly figure of nonfulfillment and repression … the doll [i.e. Olympia] that is neither dead nor alive.” According to Cixous, the uncanny represents:

... the fiction of our relationship to death, concretized by the spectre in literature. The relationship to death reveals the highest degree of the Unheimliche. There is nothing more notorious and uncanny to our thought than mortality... Our unconscious makes no place for the representation of our mortality.

That is to say that death is unthinkable, and the ghost—impossibly poised between life and death—is its closest expression in our imagination. Death’s non-signification blurs material boundaries and makes solid materiality waver but also enables life to re/create and re/construct itself. The uncanny is the demise of the old/known and the birth of new/unknown and therefore the ambiguous site of dis/embodiment where the male as Unheimlich and female as Heimlich meet. Alexandra Kokoli argues in *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice* that the repression of women from the public sphere to the home make the domestic—the Heimliche in its original, etymological sense of the homely—the uncanniest female space of all, as it becomes the site where womanhood discursively returns from being repressed from the Real as the gendered Other. This would also tie in with Cixous’ discussion, which sees the domestic in the uncanny as a space of female embodiment and pro/creation and therefore foremost associated with the life-giving principle. In the encounter of the homely and the unhomely, the grey border zone of life and death, discrete hierarchical binaries are deconstructed and concepts unfold and fold back onto each other; meaning is no longer discrete and contained but spills over from one category to another, promiscuously creating new meaning, new life, new art in lateral, non-hierarchical, cross-fertilising, and border-erasing ways. Taken as a sign of revelation and creation rather than repression, a feminist interpretation of the uncanny offers empowerment and insight rather than Oedipal emasculation and blindness and takes us back to art making on a positive, productive note of enabling promiscuity across genres and means.

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41 2016: 14, 91.
Kokoli further argues that, due to Freud’s male locatedness, feminism and psychoanalysis do not sit well together, which turns the uncanny into the site of contestation of their ambivalent relationship. A number of female artists can therefore be seen to comment on patriarchal society through the uncanny, from the vantagepoint of oppressive domesticities and sexualities, and so—critically but often laterally—engaged with the different waves of feminism that have articulated women’s political fight for rights over the years. Whereas the first two waves early 1900’s and 1960’s to 1980’s) took as their ideological basis a universalising model of the female condition, this has shifted to a deconstructionist approach of womanhood in third and fourth wave feminism (as of the 1990’s), allowing for cultural difference and gender redefinition. To me three female artists, of older generations and not openly inscribed within a feminist agenda, stand out for translating the uncanny into their work as a way to critique gender; Louise Bourgeois, Paula Rego and Judith Wright’s oeuvre plays on uncanny absences, revelations and inversions that make the homely unhomely.

Kokoli presents the French-American artist Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) as an important exponent of a critical concern with female domesticity, though the latter never formally aligned with feminism, which is noteworthy given that her life and career span most of feminism’s overall impact on western society. As it is, Bourgeois’ sculptural oeuvre is deeply enmeshed in the questioning and rewriting of gender and sexuality resulting from a “troubled childhood” with a tyrannical, promiscuous father, who had a long-standing affair with Louise’s governess. This

42 2016: 3.
43 The first wave of feminism saw the late 19th and early 20th c. struggle for basic recognition of woman’s equality to men, and so vindicated universal suffrage and property rights. The second wave of feminism, which covered the 1960s of the civil movements and its aftermath up to the 1980s, shifted the focus of action to the interplay of the private and public spaces, redefining woman’s relegation to domesticity, and so affecting the workplace, domestic duties, sexuality, the family, reproductive rights, domestic violence and sexual abuse. It paved the way for the third wave throughout the 1990s and 2000s, which attempted to redefine feminism to new generations enjoying the achievements of previous women’s political engagement while readjusting objectives. These efforts were partly directed towards identifying overlapping forms of oppression and singling out first-world female experience as not being the universal female template. In the 2000s, third-wave feminists expanded their scope and countered gender stereotypes and discrimination of cultural and ethnic difference among women. In the present decade, a fourth, ‘technological’ wave has taken off, mostly concerned with public, domestic and sexual violence against women, in a battle that is largely channelled through the new social media.
44 2016: 91.
she reflected on not only in her work but also her writing, boosted by thirty years of psychoanalysis.\textsuperscript{45} Kokoli’s discussion of female domesticity showcases Louise Bourgeois’s \textit{Femmes maisons}, that is, \textit{Women Houses}, a series of four drawings on canvas produced concurrently between 1945 and 1947, [which] depict hybrids of buildings and female nudes. All are faceless and headless, with torsos merging into or possibly consumed by the buildings, portrayed in varying degrees of stasis and distressed movement. Two are apparently armless but with gravity-defying clumps of hair, which could also be thick wafts of smoke. One is given disconcertingly spindly arms, which are conspicuously out of proportion to her curvaceously solid lower half. Another has three arms, all waving helplessly … While some of Bourgeois’s sculptures from the late 1960s and 1970s, such as \textit{Sleep} (1967) and \textit{Fillette} (1968), deliberately blur visual symbolizations of femininity and masculinity in form at least, \textit{Femmes maisons} arise not only firmly gendered but participate in the kind of sexual politics from which Bourgeois is known to have kept her distance, more often than not.\textsuperscript{46}

With \textit{Femmes maisons}, Bourgeois appears to be denouncing female entrapment in the domestic sphere, but her overall artistic career promotes an independent position and freedom from discursive constraints, avoiding gendering man and woman’s roles altogether in a defamiliarizing blurring of the biological specificity of their reproductive organs.


\textsuperscript{45} See Works Cited: Louise Bourgeois”.
\textsuperscript{46} 2016: 91.
Another woman artist whose work displays strong connections with the uncanny is the Portuguese, London-based painter and printmaker Paula Rego (born 1935). Working almost exclusively with pastels, Rego is most known for her disturbing depictions of folktale characters and young women, especially in her Dog Woman series, which displays females defying normative feminine behaviour by assuming raw, dog-like positions and behaviour, conjuring up their inferiority and vulnerability. A lot of her work concentrates on the threat or manifestation of (domestic) violence against women, and her oeuvre reveals the too-close-for-comfort gendered underbelly of a male-chauvinist society. Rather than taking an outspoken feminist stance, Rego warns against reading her oeuvre too psychoanalytically, and defines her work as a head-on engagement with woman’s reality, away from romanticised female stereotypes as imagined and cultivated by men.47

Figure 6. Paula Rego, *Dog Woman* 1994.

47 Gossling 2018.
An Australian exponent of the female uncanny can be found in Brisbane’s Judith Wright, whose installation and video work is grounded in profound feelings of trauma, loss and mourning related to motherhood, caused by the tragic loss of her only daughter shortly after birth. Heavily influencing Wright’s artistic career for decades, her daughter’s early death has informed each work of her art as yet another attempt to come to terms with the trauma of loss, her installation and video work staging the theme of bodily absence. Julie Ewington refers to the installation *A wake* (2012) to exemplify how Wright’s uncanny universe of mourning takes shape, as the series of imposing shadows reflected on the wall by a group of part-human, part-animal musicians take over from the disturbing hybrid characters in the foreground. As Ewington, writes, “They serve to evoke a departed loved one and every shadow cast onto the walls is a ghostly refrain of that original loss,” and “[d]espite the imposing presence of the performers in *A wake*, their shadows are their better selves,” believing in “the power of the shadow to conjure absence.”

![Image](image_url)  

Figure 7. Judith Wright, *A Wake*, 2012, installation Contemporary Australian Women Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

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48 2013.
Louise Bourgeois, Paula Rego and Judith Wright boast successful artistic careers in which the uncanny as the manifestation of female entrapment, violence, absence, loss, trauma and death in the domestic have played defining roles. In these women artists’ work, which by no means is decidedly feminist but explores interstitial spaces of female embodiment, we can appreciate how Freud’s analysis of the uncanny as the sign of indeterminacy remains valid as a fringe concept where discrete meanings dissipate; the appearance of the uncanny is a relevant indicator of shifts in perception, experience, power balances, discourse, among others, which signal the unsettlement and resettlement of artistic truth and tradition in multiple ways, and suspend the material realities and embodiments it generates. It is precisely the discursive porosity of the uncanny—the impossibility of establishing discrete borders and distinctions—and its promiscuous liminality spilling over into other terrains that inform my practice, allowing me to move beyond (my) limits and explore alternative means of developing, performing, and making.

Figure 8. Fiona Fell, *The Course of Objects* (detail) 2014
Thus, the trauma and psychological conflict uncovered in the uncanny has connections to my body of work and my own embodiment and materiality as an artist. The clay matter of my sculptures, my ‘Little People’, incorporates, much in the vein of what Kenneth Gross describes as ‘[t]he madness of the puppet … this creature that burrows out of shadows, into the light, a remnant of something’ that lives in a strange world and yet seems to ‘know about our world’ and so solicits our certainties from an uncanny vantage point. The particular site that I conceptualise and create sculpture projects in and from is postcolonial and postmodern: both Australian and feminine. What currently drives my artistic production is the female gaze, as she dares to stare back, scrutinise, penetrate the bare surface, and chisel out her own embodiment against the antipodean male Other. Australia has prided itself on the class-levelling cults of mateship and the ‘fair-go’, but they obscure race and gender privilege for white middle-class males. It is now also the male body that is the object of observation, the patient sufferer of scrutiny. This gaze maps out the female as a force of artistic and bodily incorporation within a space of creation and display, which is enhanced by scanning, video, and new media. Here my work, *Lones Marrow* (2013, figure 4) exemplifies the rewritten male figure in my work.

*Lones Marrow*

... no, no, I feel,

The link of nature draws me: flesh of flesh,

Bone of my bone thou art, and from thy state

Mine shall never be parted, weal or woe.

—Milton, Paradise Lost, bk ix, 1 906

My earlier concerns with ceramic sculpture coalesce to a large extent in a piece that begged the name *Lones Marrow* (2013, figure 4), a play on the core of the body that is our bone marrow but also on the loneliness that is at the heart of our existence: the impossibility of transcending the Self and merging with the Other. *Lones Marrow* (2013, figure 4) is a transitional piece to more

installation-like work, confrontationally staged on seating surfaces to gaze back and confront the inquiring onlooker. *Lones Marrow* (2013, figure 4) bears his inside on the outside—a frequent motif in my work—and the bone-shaped cavity in his chest reminds us how interior and exterior relate to each other and vie for connection. The bone gives the sculpture strength, but the cavity’s emptiness denotes its weakness, inviting us to fill up the niche of the heart with a dialogue of mutual dis/comfort. My conversation with *Lones Marrow* (2013, figure 4) in the process of his making was as follows, as I extended my love to his clay:

*Lones Marrow* feels he’s alone on a box, but actually he’s not. Two arms encircle him; they reach from behind his neck. They’ve been there for long enough to fuse onto his shoulders; perhaps, he’s forgotten they’re there.

The hand of the extra left arm reaches down and cups his balls.

It’s not modesty—it’s an act of comfort for the holder too. Genitals are soft and fondleable, warm and slightly moist. Quite possibly that hand has been there for years.

The hands he was born with, as it were, rest on his knees. They are strong and capable, positive hands poised to hold another fast with assuredness and care.

But the extra right arm is more problematic. Taking a sharp bend at the elbow it heads back up in a v-shape towards *Lones Marrow’s* heart where there is a bone-shaped hole, which is a hole in his body, right where the radius should be. It’s an absence, but maybe it’s a kind of positive absence, like the sound hole in a cello. Maybe this hole in the chest of *Lones Marrow* has come to allow him greater expressiveness, a truer ‘sound’. This arm ends abruptly with the heart-shaped end of the bone—the epiphysis—which rests on *Lones’* chest over his heart: he might feel alone but what we can see is that he is also protected by a double heart.
*Lones Marrow’s* tummy sags and his chest is slightly sunken. He is no longer young, and he is loved. It’s intensely moving. His ageing body is not pitied: it’s loved with urgency, pain borne of knowing there’s so very little time left in which to love. Only an adult could sculpt this meditation on no-longer-young sexual love and loving companionship. His own weariness and time’s wear on his body are depicted with mature tenderness.

It’s not as obvious as with *Lones Marrow* but we are all emotional mutants. Experiences have shaped us in both momentous and ordinary ways. When *Lones Marrow* found he had two sets of arms, for instance, it probably seemed fairly big but he got used to them, which is ordinary.

I suspect he is called *Lones* because he is a long way from his love, who actually rests in his *Marrow* never to be parted, weal or woe.\(^{51}\)

*Lones Marrow* (2013, figure 4) was on display at the Australian National Gallery’s Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra in 2015, and at Watters Gallery, Sydney, in 2016. In Watters Gallery, *Lones Marrow* (2013, figure 4) headed and presided over my *Imperfect Friends* (2016, figures 5–9) show, a collection of raw and rough sculptures that laid bare my inner turmoils caused by the pressures of distant love, poor health, and excess work. Watters Gallery curator Sonia Legge finds:

Emotional realism rather than magic realism [animates Fiona’s] work, as with the Portuguese artist Paula Rego, Mark Manders from the Netherlands and the English artist Christie Brown.\(^{52}\) But it’s not the external realism of Carole Feuerman, rather internal feelings deep in our hearts that is Fell’s work’s domain. The ceramicist Ron Nagle sometimes draws our attention to the inside of his sculptures; Fell draws our attention with sympathetic insight to the inside of ourselves.\(^{53}\)

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\(^{51}\) Personal notes 2015.

\(^{52}\) For Christie Brown, see also Chapter 4, Installation 5.

\(^{53}\) Legge 2016.
This brings her to reflect on *Lones Marrow* (2013, figure 4), whose disparate proportions and bodily apparatus work against the common visual grain yet make emotional sense:

For there is something exactly right about that extra set of arms growing out of *Lones Marrow*’s shoulders and while we’ll never see anyone with a bone-shaped hole over their heart we understand his chest immediately – possibly not even in a way we can say. Fell is wordlessly in tune with how we tick; she has emotional intelligence that she translates effortlessly into the three-dimensional.

We mostly live from the neck up: we ignore shortness of breath, nausea, itchiness in our limbs and many other signals our bodies give us regarding our emotional state. Perhaps part of the revelation is seeing these messages in 3-D in Fell’s work, in finding we can interpret her visual emotional language without necessarily being able to remember in regards to what, or whom, or when.

As I look back over images of Fiona’s work I find complex things I hadn’t known were there. Unexpected grief, betrayals and unexpected joys have opened my eyes to what she had already put into her work but I wasn’t experienced enough to perceive.\(^{54}\)

Legge summarises my trajectory as follows:

In the early 1990s Fell’s ceramics were often coloured and stylised. The characters were less of our world than out of a story book; spells, charms, arrangements of faces and bodies more like a chorus of memories rather than her more recent plumbing of just one idea. With the introduction of porcelain in the early 2000s her sculptures simplified, less colour seemed to focus her attention on the complexity of the individual experience. And

\(^{54}\) Legge 2016.
as her figures became larger they grew quieter and because of that somehow more urgent.\textsuperscript{55}

\textit{Lones} touched my own marrow and became a revelation that initiated a more radical commitment with clay art, and moved it out of tranquil contemplation to an engagement with performance, as can be appreciated in my collaborations with Grayson Cooke.\textsuperscript{56} The next step up in deconstruction was the \textit{Intimate Friends} exhibition, in which \textit{Lones Marrow} (2013, figure 4) appeared.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fiona_fell_lones_marrow_2013}
\caption{Fiona Fell, \textit{Lones Marrow} (installation shot) 2013}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{55} Legge 2016.
\textsuperscript{56} See Chapter 3, Collaboration 4.
Uncomfortable Bodies

Imperfect Friends

‘Imperfect Friends’
Growing up on a farm
Next to a cemetery
One was always aware
Of the Other
Animals and dead people
Not really like us
But companions nevertheless

It was safer to play
In the graveyard
Rather than in the long grass
Or open paddocks
Occupied by the animals
And their unpredictable ways
The body-sized, tiled surfaces
Would soak up
The winter sun
I would curl up and sleep
Innocent to the history
That lay beneath me

When I could read
The names and dates
On the tombs
I would search to find
The perfect friend
To come out
And play
And dance
With me amongst the others
Still nowadays
Caught round the home
A restless wanderer
In aimless pursuit
My fingers may itch
My feet may tingle
Or my heart may hurt
And make me descend the stairs
To the womb right under
That spawns and allays my fears
In clay… (August 2016)

I wrote this poem above as the accompanying text for the flyer announcing my 2016 solo show, Imperfect Friends (2016, figure 5), and it encapsulates many of the concerns and motivations that led me to the search for the practice of ceramics as a free expression of my feelings beyond the formal constraints of traditional pottery. Imperfect Friends (2016, figures 5–9) was shown in September 2016 at Watters Gallery in Sydney, and the result of a desperate fight against illness,
teaching requirements, and various deadlines, which forced me to shape, fire, and glaze ten different pieces in the month preceding their exhibition. Paradoxically, the stress caused by lack of time and the imposition of academic obligations led to the making of a particularly strong, expressive oeuvre, which was well received by gallery visitors.

The title of each piece suggests an identity through language, which associates itself to the visual image proffered. *Grief Shrouden* (2016, figure 6), the piece displayed in the flyer, is perhaps the most representative of this. Topped with a grey cap in which two holes are punched to suggest his eyes, *Grief Shrouden* (2016, figure 6) wears a funeral veil that hides a disturbing identity which is expressed in the intense treatment of clay, colour, and glaze, suggesting suffering in flayed flesh rather than the protection of a separating, self-containing skin. The tension between the inner depth of emotion and the not-so-quiet veneer of the surface contrasts with the cold distance that attempts to hide corpses under heavy tombstones. The somewhat eclectic group of figures is pulled together by both the treatment of material and the names bestowed upon them. To an extent, this exhibition shows the way in which my initial treatment of the material of clay has shifted to a more unorthodox and confronting process of making and narrative expression, under the influence of interdisciplinary collaboration and bodily interaction, which form the basis of the discussion in Chapter 2.

Figure 10. Fiona Fell, *Imperfect Friends* preparation (studio shot) 2016
Fiona Fell

Un/comfortable Bodies

Fiona Fell

Imperfect Friends

30 August to 17 September 2016

Opening
6-8pm, Wednesday 31 August 2016

Watters gallery
109 Riley street
East Sydney, NSW 2010
ph: (02) 9331 2556
e: info@wattersgallery.com
www.wattersgallery.com

Hours:
Tue and Sat 10am-5pm
Wed-Fri 10am-7pm

Figure 11. Fiona Fell, Grief Shrouden (Imperfect Friends invite) 2016

Figure 12. Fiona Fell, Imperfect Friends preparation (studio shot) 2016
Figure 13. Fiona Fell, *Dick Holden (Imperfect Friends)* 2016
Figure 15. Fiona Fell, *Sir Render (Imperfect Friends)* 2016
Chapter 2: Beyond Sculpture’s Skin: Collaboration, Promiscuity and Spectral Interiors

In this chapter, I address my explorations beyond the hardened enveloping art and glazed skin of my pieces through interdisciplinary, collaborative work in both the studio and hospital environment. In parallel, I discuss how medical scanning technology facilitates this investigation, and ties in with a technological turn in contemporary visual art practice.

Contemporary artists have increasingly used collaboration as a fruitful practice. The late 60’s and 70’s witnessed a definite shift towards performative and collaborative practices, and artists were increasingly willing to venture outside of the solo studio experience. Charles Green in his essay ‘Collaboration as Symptom’, introduction to The Third Hand, stresses that:

Collaboration was a crucial element in the transition from Modernist to postmodern art…. The proliferation of teamwork in post-1960s art challenged not only the terms by which artistic identity was conventionally conceived but also the ‘frame’ — the discursive boundary between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of a work of art. Redefinitions of art and of artistic collaboration intersected at this time.57

However, collaboration was nothing new and had already been successfully practised in Modernist times. The Dadaists and Surrealists generated artistic innovation through practices of collaboration. The Dadaists were brought together through performative acts of political activism, where the Surrealists played games such as the ‘exquisite corpse’, which involved the creation of a single image from a sequence of drawings by several artists, none of whom could see the work of those who preceded them. The creative ferment of these avant-garde groups

tended to ignore distinctions between media, including distinctions between visual art, literature, and theatre.

Collaboration 1; first encounters

In my own case, the ‘C word’\textsuperscript{58} entered into the dialogue of my studio practice around the start of the new millennium through a residency in Los Angeles (LA) supported by the Australian Arts Council. Residencies all over the world in varying degrees have encouraged interdisciplinary practices as international exchanges become increasingly focused on the interrelationship between different art forms. Promoting a sense of renewal and sustainability, these opportunities have enabled artists to expand their practices and make valuable connections with a wider international audience, and I have done so in Sydney, Fu-Ping (China), Barcelona, Paris and Los Angeles. This particular residency in LA housed performance artists and filmmakers with very few object makers on site. It was here that I was exposed to a world that challenged my practice and encouraged an enquiry into different modus operandi.

After I accepted an invitation to participate in a performance piece in an underground Hollywood venue, I crossed the line between being an object maker and entertaining a broader approach of ceramics as I engaged with Denise Ureheya, a performance artist and storyteller who had practised her discipline for the same amount of time as I had been involved in ceramics. Denise Uyehara’s performances explore the narration of identity and migration by questioning the logic of the political and personal rhetoric involved in these processes. Her work is interdisciplinary and she often works in collaboration with visual artists to explore the complexity of these themes.

I came on board to draw a map of local LA Streets onto an overhead that was simultaneously projected onto Ureheya’s body during her performance. This I carried out according to the

\textsuperscript{58} The ‘C word’ is a buzz word taken from the title of a conference with curators and artists in Melbourne 2008.
instructions in a monologue she delivered which described the LA streetscape where she grew up. Yet, the work I ended up doing with Uyehara went far beyond being an assistant to assisting her in her performance, as we also concentrated on sharing reproductive/preparatory techniques in both artmaking and performance which acquired a ritualistic value of their own worth integrating as a productive methodology. While Uyehara’s preproduction processes of scriptwriting and rehearsing contrasted with my clay preparation of rolling coils, stamping out slabs and preparing tools, we converged across these different formal languages as we took inspiration from Fellini’s film 8½, which explores the issue of writer’s block in particular and artistic identity in general. The point became to overcome individual creative block and barriers by establishing productive synergies with each other’s process of making and creating. For instance, while Uyehara practiced scales, warming up her voice, I would open a bag of clay and divide it into different portions and weights, creating sounds as I slammed the clay against different surfaces. Also, as Denise did stretches in preparation relevant to the movements in her performance, I also warmed up my hands and stretched my shoulders ready for the task of working with the weighty clay, and in doing so we created a suggestive sequence of parallel actions while working in, and bonding across different media. All these preproduction processes integrated into the performance and reflected how each of us iterated and embodied our practices. The physical action and rehearsal involved in setting up the performance extended and transformed the latter to give importance to the process over the end product, and this paved the way for future transgressive collaborative practices. Our collaboration employed our personal narratives of migrancy as a decisive factor in our strategy to create our art work so that our preparation then became the performance. Our approach resulted so fruitful that we continued to work together and explore collaboration for the length of my residency at 18th St. Art Complex in Santa Monica. The residency was rewarding and in retrospect much more influential than I could have anticipated.

In every collaboration since then, it has been crucial to tease out problems over many meetings and discussions before commencement of a project. Thorough research of the collaborator’s

59 The surrealist comedy-drama 8½ was directed by Federico Fellini in 1963 and stars Marcello Mastroianni as Guido Anselmi, a famous Italian film director whose creativity is blocked and who therefore is unable to direct a science fiction film. 8½ is about the technical and personal struggles in artistic creation and focuses on the difficulty of having to deliver something profoundly personal under public, time, and emotional pressures.
previous creative outputs and professional practice has also been necessary in establishing mutual trust. In reflection I would say all of my collaborators have had a substantial history of sustained creative output, spanning timeframes parallel to my own productivity., I have also combined practice-based and practice-led research successfully with a collaborative, cross-disciplinary approach, which has yielded novel insights, processes, and outcomes. Whereas practice-based research is concerned with the varying outcomes of artistic creation, practice-led research is interested in the process that leads to new results. In opting for collaboration and interdisciplinarity, I have often ended up walking both paths,61 and a practice-led, collaborative, interdisciplinary approach has made me question my definition of art, materiality, and embodiment. As I reflected in 2011, contemporary art practice calls for the making of the wiser object that connects us back to life in meaningful ways:

Collaborations using mixed media and new technologies are already a strongly established practice in the wider arena of contemporary arts. In academia, it is a common practice for institutionally ensconced individuals to look beyond the restrictions of their chosen working fields and to deliver their wealth of knowledge into a larger landscape. The potential of interdisciplinary practices results in numerous negotiations and outcomes, creating new arenas for discussion surrounding art-making processes. A significant outcome is an enhanced ideological and conceptual framework that enables the making of new objects. I aim to realise the potencies of all of these collaborative aspects and fuse them together as a vitrified entity that takes the form of a wiser object, an object that brings life back into the process of its making. As ceramic artists, we collaborate with the earth, fire, and water. There are constant negotiations with each stage of the process to produce the object. Through many years engaged in these negotiations, I have come to question the ontology of these objects and ask—as many have before—how we may arrive at the object with more ambiguity and how processes such as collaboration assist in opening up our own field of potentiality.62

61 See Works Cited: ‘Creativity and Cognition Studios (CCS)’.
62 Fell 2009.
An important current strand of academic attention in the Arts and Humanities focuses on how the application of new technologies in our work and lives affects our ways of seeing and understanding matter and the nature of embodiment.\(^6\) My work notices contemporary academic concerns in articulating a language of the body that transcends traditional oppositions between subject and object, active and passive, male and female, and employs concepts gleaned from new feminism, new materialism, and posthumanism. Captivated by the possibility of unpacking static notions of immanent essence in my practice-based/led, interdisciplinary, collaborative research I have produced laser-beam and X-ray images and recordings of my pieces, performed with my pieces in video recordings, and currently create installations that blur the discrete borders between the artwork, art maker, audience, and medical scanning technology.

**Collaboration 2: Pause/Play, Select & Save, Reload**

An illuminating individual experience inspired my X-ray investigations: a literal instance of border crossing at a security checkpoint at an international airport—traditionally a policed and militarised site of patrol and defence associated with the scrutiny of the male gaze. In the flux of travelling from one country to another, I was stopped at the frontier, my hand luggage was scanned, and the on-screen image revealed, in challenging ways, the presence of a sculpture I was carrying in my bag. Fascinated by the novel sight of the same ‘old’ object sitting as an unborn child in an externalised womb I decided that this inner vision, this pro/creative image, deserved following up. At geographical border crossings, the male gaze interrupts the body flow and penetrates the surface to reveal the hidden; people and objects are screened, turned inside out to release inner meaning, and to detect possible dangers and secrets. This process encapsulates a notion of the Freudian uncanny—the repressed, that which should not become known but is already and always there. Yet, it is also an attempt to fix reality according to a pre-established order, a safe discourse: the civilised Self against the alien, wild Other. To what extent then is (my) artistic practice transgressive? How does it figuratively cross borders and denote the demise of the old and the advent of the new and different? What does (my) sculpture hide and reveal? Sculpture can acquire a life of its own when it is seen through another perspective and undergoes

a new process of scrutiny. The mere concept of border crossing beckons towards different processes and tools of looking, and thus towards interdisciplinarity and the use of non-standard mediums in ceramic sculpture. It also requires different perceptions and thus the fluidity of borders and the penetrability of the subject—how we artificially keep subject–object, and the Self/Other antagonism in place.

I was first introduced to scanning as a technique applicable in and to art in a series of distinctly female, fruitful collaborations with the academic, digital artist and painter Lyndall Adams, lasting from 2005 until 2011. Over those six years, Adams and I worked together towards three different creative outcomes, where each new show was an extension of the previous one as we continued to gain valuable insights into how we arrived at a work of art, how we manipulated unfamiliar materials and tools and how we deliberately aimed to intervene in the density and space that configured the materiality and non-materiality of our work. The conversation between Adams and myself dealt primarily with the translation of processes and materials, but on the uncanny margins of differing disciplines, we also explored the potential for a rethinking of the relationship and blurring of the discrete borders between Artist and Artwork, between Self and Other. Ours was a parallel exploration of narratives of identity and its portraiture. As Adams observes,

My arts-practice speaks to the day-to-day running of the lived body in a state of flux, defined and redefined by changing practices and discourses. The discourses with which I work implicate contemporary arts-practice in situated narratives than [sic > that] picture the ways I walk around in the world.64

Establishing our own narrative as women artists, finding a visual discourse that uses images rather than words to tell a story of the artist and artefact as body, was primordial to us. In 2006, we produced a show of sixteen works for Grafton Regional Gallery NSW entitled Pause/Play, which combined digital imagery with ceramic figurative sculptures (2013, figure 10); in 2010, we mounted a collaborative exhibition entitled Select and Save at the Tweed River Gallery, New

64 Adams 2013: 2.
South Wales; and in 2011 we participated in a local community collaboration with *Reload: One Night Stack* (2008, figure 11) at the Grafton Regional Gallery.

The first collaboration, entitled *Pause/Play* and shown at the Grafton Regional Gallery, utilised virtual exchanges of images and ideas in the design of the work. We shared an interest in notions of post-feminist art practices and representations of the body which derived their inspiration from previous feminisms, whether they are in support or at odds with classical feminism. Thus, we focused on the unpacking of gendered identities that had become popular with third and fourth wave feminism as of the 1990s. We wanted to steer away from the universalist essentialism with which the female body had been imbued to promote the fight for equality and rights up until the 1980s, and were interested in deconstructing the gendered role models for women and our relationship to art as female makers. This common interest set up an
environment in which collaboration became possible through witnessing and experiencing each other’s work process and exploring the potential for a rethinking of Self and Other. This collaboration explicitly played with the notions of the uncanny: foreign bodies, the stranger, and estrangement. The works proposed were not intended as a representation of the outsider, the stranger, or a representation of the self but rather they reflected how during the period of the collaboration, we unwrapped debates surrounding both self-portraiture and representation, in which the uncanny borders between self and artwork are explored via the notion of the double. We intended to investigate the idea of collaboration between artists as somehow an issue of interactions between bodies, performativity, and emergence, and/or becoming, which resonates with new materialist approaches of art and artist as an intra-active corpus/body forever in the making. Adams raises the question in the artist’s statement:

Are these works self-portraits or a possibility for the self-portrait, if we think of self-portraiture as inviting interaction, interactivity and inter-subjectivity? We are questioning the critical exchange between artists and possibly between artists and viewer.65

In Select and Save, we explored mark-making in various media and investigated domestic and industrial materials that mimicked the architectural spaces of the gallery, with a focus on clay marks and coils. Through digital manipulation, Adams created a backdrop of landscapes made of clay marks and coils, a landscape in which clay rain drives a young woman from her home creating clay coil barriers too hard for her to climb, or rain shards falling from the sky in an attempt to impale the silhouette of the ceramic figure. Notions of embodiment as intercorporeality were evident in the work with an emphasis on re-interpreting the subject/object shadow in a conversation where the exterior and interior, and Self as Other were free to speak. Tension is created between the figures as the works are simultaneously playful and overwrought, creating uneasy anxiety in the viewers as they attempt to unravel the nature of the relationship between them. The use in the installation of the coils, a building stone in the process of ceramic creation, exposes the actual method of making the clay figures and reveals their non-essentialist, performative nature.

65 Adams 2011.
In the *Reload: One Night Stack* exhibition (2008, figure 11), I apply my usual technique of surface rendering and manipulation of the physical property of material to expose deeper perspectives via a narrative. My narrative is often a murky reminder of our own faults, our own humility, weaknesses that translate into the importance of measuring our own scars of passage. In contrast, my collaborator, Adams, responds with stories of hope and redemption or stories where hope and redemption are imagined or imaged. Adams creates a schism between images, surfaces, and patinas (her own and mine), allowing the viewer to arrive not at a single medium or image but at continual mediation between images, producing stories that bridge the gap between media. Sourced from everyday materials such as plastic and aluminium, Adams uses commercial processes usually associated with industrial manufacturing to apply printing techniques. Adams’ arts-practice speaks to the day-to-day running of the lived body in a state of flux, defined and redefined by changing practices and discourses. Her practice is reliant on images and materials that are loaded with multiple meaning and readings:

I am trying to capture the complexities of everyday emotional life by my choice of images. Figures resonate with me. The images I use are from a time I do not remember. They are images encumbered with cultural baggage available for various readings. Fiona’s works on the other hand are raw emotional fields. They respond to my imagery not by continuing along a linear and possibly idyllic life path for my protagonists but to their ultimate failure and distress.66

Regarding the trouble of overcoming physical and artistic distance in the process of collaboration, Adams writes:

The works for *Reload: One Night Stack* came out of our shared emotional experiences. On Fiona’s return to the east coast [Lismore NSW] we worked in a call and response conversation across Australia by email, Skype and telephone. Working together, we

66 Adams 2011.
found connection, commitment and convictions to the private moment in the installation of the works at the Grafton Regional Gallery, NSW

It was during this last collaboration that I first used scanning: this was not by employing an X-ray but a simple flatbed scanner, a common office device that projects and reproduces two-dimensional surfaces onto flat sheets of paper. Yet, scans of my 3D-work did keep a sense of three-dimensionality as they retained a shadow describing the curvature of the coils, suggestive of a physicality beyond the photographic image. This suggestion of curvature—a shadow—was a matter worthy of deeper investigation. It would lead to the revelation of the ghostly, shadowy underworld of my ceramic pieces in the medical setting of the hospital space, which is the object of analysis of the next, theoretical section

Figure 16. Fiona Fell and Lyndall Adams, Reload: One Night Stack 2008

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Hospital/ity & the Ghost

In this chapter, I address the importance that scan technology has acquired in my current artistic output, taking the appearance of the uncanny in this process as a productive agent of meaning in my work. In my attempt to go beyond the mere surface of my body of work and my body as an artist, I have uncovered new spaces that I see and experience as foreign to traditional ceramic art forms. A key stage in the process of engaging with new techniques and media has been to explore the spectral inner landscapes of my clay pieces by means of hospital X-ray scans, to reveal their quasi-human interiors in a process that has an uncanny, ghostly resonance with the living body. In being ghostly, these scan photographs trace the creative tension between the work of art and the artist in ways that blur and question the self-evidence of their mutual embodiment within the creative environment. The hospital constitutes an adequate space of dis/ease in which such existential tensions can be uncovered. In a well-known discussion of hospitality, or the act of being hospitable, Derrida\(^68\) points out how the concept folds back onto and questions itself, as the etymology of the word (and related words such as hospital)\(^69\) is embedded in the underlying, opposing notions of (L) hospes and (L) hostis, giving host and guest, but also hostile and hostility via the common Indo-European root *ghost-ti*, thus expressing both ends/roles in the hospitality relationship. The roles of giver and taker of hospitality are therefore interchangeable and converge upon each other, and are basic to our Self/Other relationship. This sociality also draws us into the uncanny, as guests are unhomely strangers and manifest themselves as f(r)iends—potential friends or enemies—and so may be cause for alienation and discomfort. We can conceive of the hospital space as both hospitable and hostile, both friendly and adverse, providing the conditions for life to blossom, or death to impose itself: the hospital is both a welcoming and forbidding space and literally a life-enhancing or life-taking, creative or destructive place of ambiguous dis/ease. In other words, the hospital space is uncanny.

Freud pointed out that the specific, frightening quality of the uncanny is precisely its ambivalence. Etymologically speaking, das Heimliche and das Unheimliche fold back into each

\(^{68}\) Derrida 2000; 2005.

other as that which was once known and familiar but then suppressed from the homely comes to light again. It is something we knew all along but whose traumatic existence we wanted and needed to deny, hence the fear and discomfort caused by its manifestation. Thus, the uncanny is, in fact, already ‘canny’ and so acquires the shape of the revenant, the spectre, or ghost. We are haunted by the ghosts of our past who are forever to come and never totally away from our present. To return to Cixous’ feminist interpretation (addressed in Chapter 1), the uncanny is, as a pronouncement of the life and death wish embedded in the merger of the male and female principle, a border zone where life turns to death and death to life—an orgasmic ‘little death’ as well as a moment of pro/creation. In terms of art and artist, as life and death unfold in the liminal space of the uncanny, the unhomely becomes a shadowy and porous as well as a promiscuous and productive intermediate zone where interdisciplinary collaboration signifies creation. The demise of rigid patriarchal rule and tradition implies the recovery of the matriarchal levelling of binary hierarchies as open and flexible, performative and fertile spaces of creation, where process and flux gain importance over hard and fast result and outcome—male author/ity as unchangeable law, therefore gives way to female authorship as process and performance.

The title of this chapter, ‘Beyond Sculpture’s Skin’, emulates the female gaze; it points at a spectral shadow world of alternative embodied realities underneath the hard surface of the work of art. This ghostly quasi-existence dissipates the discrete distinction between the inside and outside, the virtual image and the ‘thing’ that it represents—subject and object; maker and made; man and woman; artist and artwork. However, ‘beyond my skin’ is not only a space inside but also outside discrete and contained surfaces. It also points at how my figurative images and my body are placed in non-traditional, unfamiliar environments, and extraneous, eccentric spaces (such as hospitals) as they perform in projects of collaboration across different art disciplines. I use ‘extraneous’ in the sense of ‘introduced or coming from without; not belonging or proper to a thing; external; foreign’ and thus as a way to defamiliarize and re-investigate known and trodden ground in my art practice. The uncanny, spectral spaces that emerge in the process of X-ray scanning, which make the known and visible less known and less comfortable, contrast with the traditional, familiar, homely domains of the studio and other places my work has occupied.

71 See Works Cited: ‘extraneous’.
They are marginal to them and thus eccentric, not central to what is commonly understood as informing a ceramics practice. ‘Eccentric’ in this context is to be understood not only as physically decentred from known and accepted ceramics locations but also as ‘deviating from the recognized or customary character, practice, etc,’\(^{72}\) or a novel, unexplored way of proceeding.

The search for the extraneous and eccentric in my art practice has resulted in an emerging performance that deconstructs the sensorial field of clay. This medium is now so homely, so familiar to me that it has become an extension of my own flesh; yet, it also reveals new, hidden experiences and knowledge when put under closer scrutiny from unexpected vantage points. Scanning is the key to these inner worlds encapsulated in the medium of clay, both new and challenging, and yet pre-existing. The hospital environment has been ‘hospitable’ as well as ‘hostile’ to this process. Both welcoming as well as inimical, it is a critical space that both embraces and alienates my artwork from its known, material parameters, a place on the mortal limits of life, health, and well-being that allows me to project my material investigations of existential dis-ease on the uncanny limits of life and death.

**Collaboration 3: The Patient Piece**

Engaged in the topics of embodiment, collaboration, and cross-disciplinary practice, I developed my own research project involving X-ray modalities in the hospital setting. I first employed radiographic scanning of my work as part of a project with a group of ceramic artists in Fu-Ping, China, for a proposed curated show called *Nothing to Declare but Good Company*, which was to follow on from a residency I completed there in 2008. This exhibition never happened, but preparing for it paved my way into more sophisticated forms of scanning. I engaged with the ceramist and radiologist Caroline Ainsworth, who works in the radiography department of my local hospital, to experiment with the perception of my figurative works, and this is how I started using a CAT (or CT)\(^{73}\) scanning machine to explore my work. The CAT/CT scanner is a sophisticated tomographic device, which employs narrow beams of X-rays in two planes at

\(^{72}\) See Works Cited: ‘eccentric’.

\(^{73}\) See Works Cited: ‘CAT scan’.
various angles and thus enables us to produce computerised cross-sectional images of the body beyond the bone and cartilage, and so to include soft tissue. What is more, this technology creates images that show slices of the work in 3D as a moving image, which would later lead me to video-recording explorations.

Figure 17. Sculpture X-ray in preparation 2012, digital image

What made my collaboration with Ainsworth rich and special was its setting in the adverse hospital environment, where the clean, white, and aseptic contrast sharply with the emotional qualities with which I charge my pieces. We found ways of dealing with this discomforting environment by performing the X-ray process—reception, placement, scanning, and retrieval—in a respectful, caring, humanising manner, such as using a wheelchair for transporting the pieces inside the hospital walls.

Figure 18. Sculpture scanning preparation (collaboration Fiona Fell and artist/radiographer Caroline Ainsworth)
Figure 19. Looking at the first of the scans at Lismore Base Hospital 2012

To me, CAT scanning started out as purely an aesthetic exercise, but in hindsight, it has exposed a hybrid myriad of connections and possibilities. I have since worked deeper into this project by making work that is more conducive to the scanning process, using body parts that slot into the ceramic figures, testing clay at different stages of vitrification, and identifying appropriate density settings. The material of clay has a similar density to bone so that, when X-rayed, an internal landscape is revealed and traces of fingerprints and imperfections exposed. These processes show a direct relationship between image and object, external and internal gestures, and it is this direct interplay that has informed my current practice and research. Thus, scan technologies have become fundamental to the articulation of my art, but so have they to other (female) artists’ expressive vocabularies since the very discovery of X-rays. The next section gives a brief overview of the history of scanning and how it became, perhaps unexpectedly, incorporated into creative art practice.
Figure 20. Fiona Fell and Kellie O’Dempsey, *Watershed* (Barcelona exhibition) 2014

Figure 21. Scanned ceramic work digitally manipulated
Scan Technology: Origins and Applications

Scanning is the process of making a radiograph, the production of an image on a radiosensitive surface using radiation beyond visible light to penetrate hidden, deeper layers of a body, animate or inanimate. It is the application of a non-standard form of energy, beyond visible light, to reveal and capture a different, transparent aspect of what we normally perceive as stable, opaque matter in the real. Traditionally, X-rays have been applied for analytic and diagnostic purposes. Yet, while it started out for use on live, dis-eased bodies, X-ray scanning has subsequently been applied to inanimate matter. The history of X-raying shows how its application has primarily been analytic and diagnostic. W. C. Roentgen first discovered the existence of such radiation in 1895 and named it X-rays because its nature was as yet unknown. Its penetrative, analytical possibilities appealed to different groups of professionals who developed its application into, primarily, a diagnostic technique. In hard science, X-ray line spectra were used by H. G. J. Moseley to establish atomic numbers (1913), and they also provided further confirmation of the quantum theory of atomic structure, which, as we shall see in Chapter 4, will take us to new materialist notions of matter.

Yet, important for the development of the language of visual art was the discovery of X-ray diffraction by Max von Laue (1912) and its subsequent application by W. H. and W. L. Bragg (father and son) to the study of crystal structure. Not surprisingly, X-ray crystallography became a scientific focus at the time that Cubism was emerging as an exciting and innovative approach to modern art:

Stephen Kern has pointed to x rays as one factor contributing to a changed concept of the relation of space and objects in modern culture. He also sensed a possible relation between x rays and the Cubism of Picasso and Braque, asserting, ‘X-ray must have had something to do with the Cubist rendering of the interior of solid objects.’\footnote{Kern quoted in Dalrymple 1988: 323.}
Scientific and painterly techniques were pointing towards a common analytical framework and a new way of seeing reality beyond its surface appearance: reality became multi-layered. Thus, the technique has been used by museums in art conservation to determine the age of an object and to identify the processes and materials by which a work was made so as to establish its origin and enable its repair and conservation. Its diagnostic capabilities expose the materials, the layers, to reveal a hidden world interacting with its liminal, discrete surface, but also rewrite its origins and history. In 2015, I was fortunate enough to contact and visit the conservation team at the Romanesque art museum of Barcelona, MNAC—Museu d’Art Nacional de Catalunya—whose members generously introduced me to their knowledge of diagnostic imagery and damage repair of valuable antique painting and sculpture. This kind of diagnostic scanning is still very close to its original medical purposes, but it was soon used in more unconventional ways in the arts, which picked up on the new way of envisaging matter in a productive-creative rather than analytical manner. As Linda Dalrymple Henderson comments, ‘By pointing to the limited extent of the visible spectrum, x rays established unquestionably the relativity of perception and turned the attention of artists away from the visual world towards an invisible, immaterial reality.’

Artists have long used X-ray technologies directly in the conception and making of their work, and as part of that work of art, creating shadow worlds out of the ordinary that surprise the onlooker and solicit the steady appearance of reality: matter is no longer solid, permanent, and opaque but becomes transparent, dissolves and spectralises under the radiographic gaze. The uncanny shadow world of the ghostly reaches out beyond the object’s surface and person’s skin and problematises the discrete separation of inside and outside, Self and Other. It is easy to see how the penetrating precision of X-ray technology in art, in fact questioned and deconstructed reality as Modernism had constructed it. Artists of the first half of the twentieth century eagerly latched on to the new techniques of visualisation and incorporated these into their art practice. The list includes famous names such as László Moholy-Nagy, Pablo Picasso, Man Ray, and Alexander Rodchenko.

The most experimental of these artists was arguably Man Ray (1890-1976), who developed what is known as the ‘photogram’ in 1921; this was a camera-less picture formed by the action of light on an object in direct contact with light-sensitive material. Man Ray’s ghostly images built on the surprising effects of the shadow’s negative, the most underexposed elements remaining white, on different exposure times for elements within the same image, on movement, and the unlikely juxtaposition of common objects, creating extra-ordinary shadow worlds out of the ordinary. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York highlights the importance of this random photographic technique in that:

Man Ray had photographed everyday objects before, but these unique, visionary images immediately put the photographer on par with the avant-garde painters of the day. Hovering between the abstract and the representational, the rayographs revealed a new
way of seeing that delighted the Dadaist poets who celebrated his work, and that pointed the way to the dreamlike visions of the Surrealist writers and painters who followed’.76

Man Ray self-referentially renamed his experiments with the photogram as ‘rayographs’, perhaps to highlight the novelty of his approach, but the technique had been used well before that. Almost a hundred years before Man Ray’s rayographs, a British woman botanist had already taken important steps into the new area of photographic representation along similar lines. Anna Atkins, daughter to a well-respected scientist whom she shared her passion for science with, is nowadays considered the first woman photographer.77

Figure 23. Man Ray, *The Kiss* 1922

Figure 24. Anna Atkins, *Ferns* 1843
Figure 25. Robert Rauschenberg, *Booster* 1967
In 1839, she was introduced to the new photographic technique of the ‘photogram’; a term coined by the Royal Academy member William Henry Fox Talbot, who developed the process. It was also known as ‘sun-printing’ and operated along precisely the same lines as Man Ray’s work—pale white and grey contact shadows of objects generated by putting them on a light-sensitive support and exposing the composition to sunlight. Talbot’s technique was soon improved by the chemist Sir John Frederick William Herschel, who started working with the cyanotype in 1942, the intense blue colour of which is responsible for the expression ‘blueprint’ in English. Atkins, a well-read botanist and observer of nature, dedicated herself to making photograms of the algae species, flowering plants, and ferns found in the British Isles throughout the 1840s and 1850s, and made her prints available to the public in choice book editions, whose excellent quality of paper and print have withstood the influence of time and decay. Despite the artistic sensibility she showed in her photographic projects, Atkins’s pioneering role was forgotten until the 1970s, when feminist art historians rediscovered her importance more than a century after her death; as Hans Rooseboom, curator of a large retrospective of her work in the Rijksmuseum of Amsterdam, explains: ‘Until then, the history of photography, and particularly the contribution of Atkins, had received very little attention.’

His comment sadly illustrates the traditional invisibility of women’s art in the Western canon.

Fifty years after Man Ray’s scanning experiments, Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), who is associated with Pop Art’s penchant for the art object’s reproducibility, created his own version of art’s shadow with the key work *Booster* (1967), which featured a six-foot-high X-ray image of his body. It was the largest hand-pulled, single-sheet print ever made at the time, and challenged painting’s dominance as a medium. Seemingly random images suffused *Booster*, including a chair, an astronomical calendar, two drills, and a photograph of a man in the midst of a long jump. This apparent randomness offered viewers an opportunity to bring their own interpretation to the work. As Babington observes ‘Booster remains one of the most significant prints of the twentieth century, a watershed that catapulted printmaking into a new era of experimentation.’

Rauschenberg is remembered as a ‘New-Dadaist’ whose unconventional works originate ‘in the gap between art and life’, questioning the distinction between the artistic and everyday objects.

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78 Rooseboom quoted in Moorhead 2017.
Booster’s levelling conceptualisation was in line with the democratising impetus of the 1960s, and the shadowy pale imagery of the X-ray scan, which allowed Rauschenberg to go beyond the superficiality of the skin-deep and address the deeper layers of human life, was instrumental in his response to what Walter Benjamin termed art’s aura (art’s difference from the mass-produced object), as we will see in the following section.

Scanning Art’s Shadow

The question we may ask, then, is what contemporary artists are looking at/for when they use scanning as an art form, which makes the art object distinct from the ordinary, functional object—how it constitutes art’s difference. Influenced by modern art in the early twentieth century, in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), Benjamin defines art’s difference through the concept of the ‘aura’. Benjamin’s premise is that ‘The authenticity of [the object of art] is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it.’ Yet, this ‘added value’ (I use this monetary expression intentionally to denote Benjamin’s anti-capitalist stance), which he recognises as art’s aura, ‘withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art . . . [which] detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of [artistic] tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence.’

Benjamin conceives of the ‘aura’ as that unique, singular quality of temporal and geographical locatedness that gives the work of art its distinctive character, its authenticity, which he compares to the way mechanised mass reproduction vilifies art and empties out its value. Miriam Bratu Hansen highlights the nostalgic return to a sublime concept of beauty that Benjamin’s dialectic take on art represents:

… the common understanding of Benjamin’s aura [is] as a primarily aesthetic category—as shorthand for the particular qualities of traditional art that he observed waning in modernity, associated with the singular status of the artwork, its authority, authenticity, and unattainability, *epitomized by the idea of beautiful semblance*. On that understanding,
aura is defined in antithetical relation to the productive forces that have been rendering it socially obsolete: technological reproducibility, epitomized by film, and the masses, the violently contested subject/object of political and military mobilization.\textsuperscript{81}

Art’s singularity is democratised yet also undone in the mechanisation process, and becomes victim to the dialectics of mass-production, a materiality that clashes with, and annihilates art’s perceived aura of Modernist singularity. Of course, Benjamin was a politically engaged, Marxist philosopher of Jewish descent who lived and wrote in Germany between the two World Wars. He argued against the fascist vilification of modern art as degenerate (so-called \textit{Entartete Kunst}); the way the Nazis connected it to presumed Jewish and Marxist corruption; and the concomitant fascist exaltation of traditional painting and sculpture. This ideological manipulation and depoliticization of the perception of art, which Benjamin coined the ‘aesthetization of politics’, led to the separation of art from its unique existence within a specific socio-historical context and tradition, and could only be undone by its antithesis, what he called the ‘politicization of aesthetics’\textsuperscript{82}—the realisation that any form of art is always already informed discursively. The latter returns us to the way art is culturally determined, yet also contests the discrete binary social hierarchies that make such determination possible.

In \textit{Art and Its Shadow}, the art historian and philosopher Perniola moves out of Benjamin’s dialectic conception of creation into a so-called ‘third’ system, dimension, or regime of art,\textsuperscript{83} which is neither reigned by a traditional religious sense (as a spiritual sublime) nor by a functionally mechanical one (as material presence) of artistic perception, but in what he deems a postmodern fetishized, animated form of the inorganic:

> It is precisely in contemporary art that this mixture of materiality and abstraction finds its most extreme manifestation. In fact, the personality of the artist is transformed into \textit{a brand name} that guarantees the value of artistic merchandise. The formal characteristics

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{81} Bratu Hansen 2008: 336, my emphasis. 
\textsuperscript{82} Benjamin (1935) 2008: 41-42. 
\textsuperscript{83} Perniola 2004a: 44-54.}
of the latter lose importance and can even be substituted by an idea, as is the case, in fact, in conceptual art.\(^{84}\)

The person and oeuvre of Andy Warhol come forcefully to mind in Perniola’s deconstruction of the aura. Perniola’s proposal of a ‘third dimension’ anchors art firmly in postmodernity:

For the modern paradigm, the artistic value resides in the work and all that is external to it is added to the *intrinsic* value of the work. Whereas as in the contemporary paradigm, the artistic value resides in the combination of connections (discourses, actions, grids, situations and sense effects) established around or starting from an object, which is only an occasion, a pretext, or a point of transition.\(^{85}\)

We are moving here from an ontological approach of authenticity towards a situational and performative notion of the art work, with a blurring of discrete borders into a nebulous, norm-defying, promiscuous area of interdisciplinary, collaborative, im/material creation. Perniola’s trope for this development in art is the *shadow*, rather than the singularising brightness of the aura. What makes up the difference that distinguishes the artwork from its surroundings is the obscure, fleeting non-preservation of its im/material shadow. It is the shadow that is an elusive emotional repository of ‘the feelings of differences,’ a ‘remainder’ that operates non-hierarchically, neither beyond or below (the quality of) the artwork, but manifesting itself laterally, as he writes. In Derridian, deconstructivist terms, the remainder is an extra or excess:\(^{86}\) ‘a supplement, a left-over, a super-addition of sense, but not an alternative, not an opposite, not the other side of a binary pair. A remainder is like a shadow, it follows around what it adds on to.’\(^{87}\) This shadow of excess or remainder represents ‘the idea that there is in art as in philosophy something which is irreducible to the processes of normalization and standardization at work in society,\(^{88}\) taking art and its maker out of discrete boundaries and binaries. Art in this sense has to do with the uncanny incorporation of discursive gaps. The shadow, as the repository of

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\(^{84}\) Perniola 2004a: 46, my emphasis.

\(^{85}\) Perniola 2004a: 47, my emphasis.

\(^{86}\) Perniola 2004a: 63.

\(^{87}\) Silverman 2004: x-xi.

\(^{88}\) Perniola 2004a: 65
difference, blurs the discrete distinctions between subject and object, mind and matter, the immaterial and the material: like Derrida’s ghostly *revenant*, it both questions as well as pursues what it is associated to. Scan technology was first and foremost given a scientific purpose as an instrument of precision to create light out of darkness and understanding out of non-definition. One finds, however, that in the arts scanning vaunts its deconstructive potential: in facilitating the multi-layered gaze, it reveals art’s shadow as a diffuse, grey, in-between area of creation. This is what Perniola terms the ‘Third Dimension’ of art, and finds an echo in what Charles Green calls art’s ‘third hand’— the extra that is added to art in the process of collaboration. Green argues for a veiled deconstructionist ‘shadow’ rather than a dialectically envisaged ‘aura’ as the quality that distinguishes art from the ordinary. It is also on a par with other manifestations of productive, hybridising interpositionality and flux in the Humanities such as Homi Bhabha’s hybridising postcolonial ‘Third Space’.

Through the presence of art’s ghostly shadow as a creative, promiscuous space of difference, we move back into the uncanny. As Freud pointed out, the uncanny typically manifests itself as some confronting, haunting, discomforting double: the dead ringer, the mirror image, the harbinger of death, the revenant ghost, or the dark shadow, all linked as much to life as to death, to pro/creation as to destruction. Through the persistence of the shadow as an aesthetic effect, of art’s difference as performative shadow rather than immanent aura, once again we enter and blur the marginal, extreme edges of existence bordering on dissolution and death—of Self versus Other, of artist versus art. To what extent is art a hospitable space, a friendly or ‘fiendly’ realm where artists may find their niche? Though from different Indo-European roots, the formal similarity of *friend* and *fiend* suggests an ambiguous opposition that adds a further twist to my

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89 Perniola 2005a: 44-54.
90 Green 2001: 179-188.
91 Homi Bhabha envisages the ‘third space’ in supra-dialectic terms: ‘for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third arises, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom’ (Rutherford, 1990: 211).
93 Douglas Harper’s *Online Etymology Dictionary* (2001-17) lists *friend* (n.) as derived from Old English freond ‘one attached to another by feelings of personal regard and preference,’ and *fiend* (n.) Old English feond ‘enemy, foe, adversary.’ He remarks that “As spelling suggests, the word originally was the opposite of friend (n.).” See Works Cited: ‘friend’ for further reading.
discussion of the ambiguous meanings of hospital/ity and the uncanny in Chapter 2: the undead ghost may be related etymologically to the host and the guest, their spelling suggesting the same conceptual origin and thus folding back into each other in the crucible of the uncanny: of comfort and discomfort, of life and death, of the female and male, of pro/creation and destruction. This link is suggested by the remarkable correspondences in spelling and sound between the three terms and the Indo-European root *ghos-ti, and the ambiguity of guest as f(r)iend. There is no conclusive etymological evidence to support this claim, and while dictionaries such as the Oxford English Dictionary and Online Etymological Dictionary do not establish a connection among these concepts, it is worth pointing out that in a major acclaimed study of the spread of the Indo-European languages David Anthony observes that ‘... English guest and host ... are cognates, derived from one Proto-Indo-European root (*ghos-ti-), immediately clarifying that ‘A ‘ghost’ in English was originally a visitor or guest.’ He does not elaborate further on this but instead specifies that:

The two social roles opposed in English guest and host were originally two reciprocal aspects of the same relationship. The late Proto-Indo-European guest-host relationship required that ‘hospitality’ (from the same root through Latin hospes ‘foreigner, guest’) and ‘friend-ship’ (*ieiwas-) should be extended by hosts to guests (both *ghos-ti-) in the knowledge that the receiver and giver of ‘hospitality’ could later reverse roles.94

Anthony’s explanation does not necessarily mean that ghost, guest, and host are etymologically related, but rather that their similar pronunciation and spelling suggest a productive trope. Through the uncanny shadow world of scanning, we may explore the boundaries of the Self/Other relationship, be it between one artist and another or art maker and object, thus moving across individual singularity and discreteness into an interdisciplinary collaborative space whose possibilities for artistic growth, innovation and female embodiment should be noted and fostered. As I wrote about my art practice:

Be it in the studio, a residency or in teaching practice, it has been my passion over the last ten years to explore the possibilities of collaboration. Engagement with the collaborative process has enabled me to step outside of my secure zone, the familiar ground in which one operates. This has facilitated an awareness of what outcomes are possible when working in conjunction with a collaborator from outside one’s general area of practice. Association and development of various projects have allowed me to gain skills and knowledge not normally associated with my chosen field and has shifted the way I approach my art practice.\footnote{Fell 2011.}

The application of scan techniques to the arts may serve to establish such empowering spaces of interdisciplinary collaboration, and so the following section assesses the work of three female artists who employ scan technology to return the gaze and rewrite female embodiment and materiality, and whose oeuvre has been a personal source of inspiration.

**Contemporary Scan Art: The Endoscopic Gaze**

Scan techniques are incorporated by a number of contemporary artists, both male and female, who may expand their practices beyond such areas as photographic, video, and installation art to the realm of science in order to reinterpret reality and materiality with the aim of producing new output. They tend to play on notions of uncanny estrangement and ghostly non/presence in the hazy pale scan image to comment on bodily dis/integration and re-animation. Scan technology allows for an endoscopic application of the gaze as it dissects and fragments the body under scrutiny beyond the protective, visible layer of the skin. Thus, the artwork resulting from the application of scan techniques questions everyday reality and makes materiality waver. As a woman artist, I am interested in the female gaze and female embodiment, and therefore I will focus on three women artists who have incorporated scan technology in their artistic vocabulary to make 3D, video, and installation work and so broached new terrains in ways that are relevant to my current practice.
Marilene Oliver, born in the UK in 1977, is originally a printmaker and photographer but now works with medical imaging such as MRI\textsuperscript{96} and CT scans to create sculptural artwork. The status of the human subject is examined via a digitised apparatus, and anonymised datasets are used to embody specific narratives and identities,

\ldots [which] speculate how we might survive, refigure and evolve in the Digital Age \ldots At first my work attempted to repair the fragmentation and dislocation brought about by medical imaging and to reclaim the body from the contemporary medical and digital gaze in order to poetically subvert it and offer future relics of our digitised selves.\textsuperscript{97}

After previously concentrating on emotional and physical distancing, her current work has evolved toward re-embodiment and away from the strictly posthuman.\textsuperscript{98}

Oliver’s installations, such as Family Portrait (2003, figure 21) and Fallen Durga (2010, figure 23), incorporate and subsume scan techniques in the dialogue between artist and artwork. The installation Family Portrait is a series of sculptures of each of her family members (2003, figure 21). Each sculpture comprises a stack of 90 sheets of clear acrylic onto which MRI-scanned images have been digitally manipulated, translated into silk screens, and printed. When the scans have been printed and stacked, the illusion of a body is formed, and the work appears and disappears according to the viewpoint of the viewer. The piece Fallen Durga displays how the scanning data has been used as a design process to inform the work and mutate the figurative form (2010, figure 23). It is a more appropriate example than Family Portrait (2003, figure 21) or Dervish Spreads (2014, figure 22) in that it attempts to recreate the actual body with accurate representation.\textsuperscript{99} Oliver’s oeuvre comments on the vicissitudes of the digital age and its accompanying posthuman disembodiment. It goes beyond the two-dimensionality of the digital image and aims for the productive merger of different techniques into 3-D installations. My own work with scanning, based on the visualisation and recording of my sculptural pieces’ interiors and its interplay with my body in their making, correlates to her 3D installations in that it both

\textsuperscript{96} Magnetic Resonance Imaging.
\textsuperscript{97} Oliver 2018.
\textsuperscript{98} Oliver 2018.
\textsuperscript{99} Oliver 2018.
deconstructs and reconstructs bodies—it dematerialises as well as rematerializes the body depending on the viewer’s standpoint.


Oliver’s work connects with the oeuvre of the interdisciplinary Australian artist **Justine Cooper** (1968), who employs medical and scientific scan technology to explore the body in novel ways and redefine identity and selfhood in all its social, cultural, and scientific complexity. Her investigation is beyond the skin-deep and penetrates the superficial layers of representation that constitute our identities, such as hair-do and colour, skin colour, body shape, and facial features, and employs digital imaging technologies to lay bare the cellular worlds contained in our interior biologies. This imagery beckons towards the uncanny in its appeal to the personal, individual, and intimate while yet being unknown and alien, setting off a process of defamiliarization. The resulting art work, as in the sculptures *Trap* (1998) and *Reach* (2000) and the installation *RAPT II* (1998, figure 24), unsettles the vision we habitually have of our body parts and ruptures our sense of self in its deconstruction by fragmentation and reconstruction through re-assembling, and so signals a way forward for my own work that leads to a new materialist understanding of the matter of clay.

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100 See Works Cited: Cooper, Justine.
Mona Hatoum (1952, Lebanon) is a Palestinian video installation artist who lives and works in London, where she was also educated in the arts. Her work investigates the gendered gaze, surveillance, and embodiment by questioning and obliterating essentialist binaries, such as ‘self and other, private and public, intimacy and alienation, attraction and disgust, fascination and abjection, lyricism and violence,’ that build on the interior/exterior divide. The latter is emblematically put into material practice in a video installation from 1994, Corps Étranger (foreign body/matter/substance) (1994, figure 25), in which the alien body of an endoscopic camera is introduced into, and travels through the body of the artist. The installation, whose title in French plays on a sense of defamiliarization, unsettlement, dislocation, and unbelonging, forces the viewer to enter inside a narrow and low cylindrical space-cum-body where the endoscopic imagery is projected onto the floor, a perspective that heightens the discomfort of following the internal camera’s trajectory with the eye. By going beyond/through the protective membrane of her skin using an endoscopic camera, Hatoum wants to convey that:

101 Di Marco 2012: 29.
… the body becomes vulnerable in the face of the scientific eye, probing it, invading its boundaries, objectifying it. I felt that introducing the camera, which is a foreign body, inside the body would be the ultimate violation of a human being, leaving not a single corner unprobed.¹⁰²

Figure 30. Mona Hatoum, *Corps Étranger* 1994

According to Hatoum, this suspension of a discrete border between the inside and the outside of the body is equivalent to the body becoming an alien territory in/to itself; in other words, the objective vantage point of the observer is internalised as the camera travels beyond the artist’s skin and their gaze is ‘no longer detached, scientific and allegedly “dominant” because the observer [him/herself] . . . is caught in a “foreign place”. The observer becomes observed. And the “torturer” becomes the “victim”.’ Hatoum claims this inversion of the gaze deconstructs male, medical power and turns the female body into ‘the devouring womb, the vagina dentata’. The monstrous empowerment of the female body through the appearance of the ‘vagina

¹⁰² Hatoum quoted in Di Marco 2012: 29.
dentata\textsuperscript{103} locates creation in the uncanny realm of life and death, delivering a defamiliarizing foreign body in the act of the gaze: a corpse as well as an oeuvre that leaves no one cold. The sense of alienation and unbelonging projected through Hatoum’s internalisation of the gaze is akin to my probing my figurative sculpture’s interiors, which manifest themselves as foreign and alien to the observer.

It seems to me that, in their effort to subvert the male gaze and assume agency, women artists especially have developed strong and innovating work beyond the strictly 2D and photographic, such as featured in the work of their male counterparts David Meisel, Nick Turvey, and Mark Penhale, among others. Women artists have been searching for more interactive and interdisciplinary spaces that incorporate a gendered sense of embodiment in the way they make and perform their installations, even employing the rather aseptic contexts of posthuman digital technologies. In other words, with the aid of scan technology, these women produce a complex and sophisticated oeuvre that refuses to stand in the shadow. Júlia Laki sums up the uncanny deconstructionist but also reconstructionist potential of scan technologies when applied to artistic expression. Rather than seeing the resulting artwork as the point of arrival of meaning, Laki views:

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\ldots \text{[such] artworks as players in a larger circuit of generating understanding around the interior views of the body: as imaging technologies make previously unseen spaces accessible to the gaze, the vistas generated by them become slippery terrains … the domain of contemporary conceptual art is one of the very few spaces in which medical/scientific practices can appear in their visual complexity, but dislodged from their normal referential terrain.}^{104}
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This is to say that their application in the arts lifts these technologies out of a limiting discourse of analytical application and inserts them into a fuzzy terrain of interdisciplinarity in which new meaning and functions can be generated. Through scanning applied in the arts, borders and limits

\textsuperscript{103} Di Marco 2012: 30
\textsuperscript{104} Laki 2012: 63-64.
become uncanny, and materiality uncertain—porous to interpretation and deconstructive critique—and the search for discrete essence and truth as encapsulated and separated by animate or inanimate surfaces is problematised. The scanned image is offered up as the flat representation of shadowy, deeper, below-the-surface realities, which belie the very two-dimensionality of surface appearances. Otherwise, invisible details, elements, and structures are put into play and perspective, and they challenge the limitations of human perception, yet they also offer new, exciting ways of apprehending embodiment and the tangible world that surrounds us. Through scanning technologies, science and art speak to—or even solicit—each other and tread on each other’s shadow: not too close for comfort seemingly; they may yet be closer than appears to the naked eye. Scanning added a new dimension to my art practice and output, one that took my art and my female self into the virtual depth of the moving image, as Chapter 3 explores.
Chapter 3: Into the Virtual: Artist, Artwork, and Art Video

After fifteen years of making work with a commitment to the genre of figuration in ceramic sculpture my practice was at an exciting threshold and even in a state of ambiguity; I shuttled between making figurative works that had the conviction of the private moment and collaborating with other artists where we engaged with processes of re-imagined outcomes. These outcomes have involved, apart from scanning, also sound works, experimentations with light and the moving image, large-scale photography, and the collection of raw footage for short films. The interdisciplinary outcomes of these mutual engagements with the body (of art) have become yet another stage on the way towards a reconsideration of agency, materiality, and artistic embodiment as a space beyond traditional gender divisions.

Collaboration 4: No Glaze No Glory

My video collaborations have further explored the creative tension between artwork and artist in ways that blur and question the self-evidence of their mutual embodiment and environment. They take my body and sculpture as the points of departure to investigate the continuities and discontinuities between both. Once again, I return to the skin’s surface, only to blur the distinction between the animate and inanimate by implicating my body and work fully in the moving image, using their shadows as the grey in-between spaces where both may meet and merge, cross over, and add that extra quality that distinguishes art from the ordinary. Video footage was taken throughout all of my scanning procedures and I became increasingly aware of the theatre of my body in relation to the figures and the clinical spaces that were occupied. It called for an investigation of my own embodiment in relation to the work of art, which eventually led to the production of some shorts in collaboration with Raimond de Weerdt, a video artist and photographer. Our projects together, Damned (2006); Head On Back (2008, figure 26); L’ Interruptión (2011, figure 27); and La Obra Perfecta (2013, figure 28), explore the
relationship between art, artist, embodiment, and the shadow, and challenged my hold on objecthood and boosted my interested in new media.

After having met by chance in the Gunnery Studios in Sydney 2003, we started our collaboration No Glaze No Glory, which turned into an ongoing dynamic and challenging experience. de Weerdt comments on our first joint project:

It was a challenge to come up with an idea of how to combine such diverse media as ceramics, which has a tradition of more than 2000 years, with media art that has been around for about 5 minutes. We both shared an interest in the works by American artist Man Ray, and decided to make his 1932 work ‘Object to be destroyed’ a starting point. Rather than a philosophical title of the work, we started to investigate the actual destruction of ceramic objects and recording this with a video camera.

Instead of showing the object’s moment of impact and destruction, we reversed the footage to show the object reassemble, travel upwards and disappear off the screen symbolising the object’s non-existence. Dammed 1 and Dammed 2 were exhibited at Lismore Regional Gallery and the Brisbane Powerhouse. This installation included photographs, ceramic objects and a five-minute video loop. Many artists have addressed ideas based on the destruction of the object in an attempt to question the object/artefact’s ontology. Jean Tinguely’s kinetic sculpture of the 1970s made haptic marks before destroying itself in performative acts in which acid ate and marked drawings, emphasising art as process rather than end result. Ai Wei Wei’s dropping of cultural-historical urns says more to his audience than just the loss of the object through gravity. Ai Wei Wei himself proposes that the action is powerful only because someone thinks it is powerful and invests value in the destroyed objects.

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105 Man Ray’s famous metronome with a photograph of an eye clipped to the swinging arm was first created in 1922-3. He used it to mark the pace of his brush strokes when painting until one day he grew tired of it and smashed it to pieces. In 1957, the object was being exhibited in the exhibition Dada in Paris when a group of protesting students took Man Ray at his word and actually destroyed it (Umland, Sudhalter; and Gerson 2008: 231)

Georgia Close, when responding to Wei Wei’s work, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn and Breaking of Two Blue and White Dragon Bowls* (1995), elaborates:

From one perspective it can be interpreted as being critical of the co-modification of Chinese antiques on the international market. It also draws attention to the widespread destruction of Chinese cultural heritage items during the cultural revolution, a destruction that has continued to take place to make way for the development of modernisation in China.\(^{107}\)

The attraction I felt towards the smashing events was in no way loaded with such cultural significance; however, the same act of destroying an object no doubt raises questions on the object’s worth. In *No Glaze No Glory* (2011, figure 26), de Weerdt and I attempted to extend the object into a dramatic gesture of destruction and resurrection through the video process as a way of clearing the ground for ‘wiser objects’ to be made, that is, objects that resuscitate life in their process of making. Therefore, the collaboration became a design tool for the making of ceramic sculpture.\(^{108}\)

Thus, this collaboration gave me the chance to revisit and further explore notions of the fragmentation and reassembly of the figure. By collaborating with an experienced video artist, each obstacle was tackled with an inspiring dialogue where I found myself in a position of perpetual learning. Ongoing research enabled a deeper enquiry into fragmentation, and the spaces between the object/artefact and the audience, including possibilities that present themselves to invigorate my object-based ceramic practice. An element of risk-taking was introduced so that an artefact could arise from the poetically destructive process. By reconsidering these new forms as wiser objects/artefacts that create dialogue with the digital mediums used in these collaborations I could redesign and rework an object having experienced its loss and my own at the same time, therefore creating a link between my known work and processes with a liminal space—a space of expectation both for the audience and myself. Nevertheless, there is always some relief when I return to the studio after collaboration to have

\(^{107}\) In: Merewether, UNSW Press 2008: 15.

my work to myself after returning from what I can only explain as an invigorating but exhausting journey. I have concluded that what it takes to sustain oneself in this field is a commitment and a conviction to the private moment shared from time to time with other artist/s connecting with similar processes of re-imagined outcomes and expanded horizons. My video explorations within *No Glaze No Glory* have always followed this enabling pattern.

![Image of sculpture and artist](image-url)

Figure 31. Raimond de Weerdt and Fiona Fell, *Head on Back* (Proof sheet from the collaboration *No Glaze No Glory*) 2008

*L’Interrupción* (figure 27), shot in 2011, is a four-minute film, which includes a femme fatale character and shows the drama of the artist in a nightmarish, Gothic version of studio activity. It sees the sculptural doll-like figure of the artist shuttle between the making of art and becoming the work of art herself on the impulse of the insistent and disruptive ringing of a Bakelite telephone as if it were the call of a greater creative force. The key moment of the film, which informs the title, is when the actress—me—exclaims, ‘How dare you call me here!’; questioning
the caller’s interruption of the artistic process. The short is about the obsession with materiality, filmed in black and white following the classic film-noir genre from the 1940’s and 1950’s. *L’Interruptió* adopt *s* the noir formulas in both content and production: an Expressionist black-and-white style and a pessimistic, cynical worldview. Another line from the short, ‘Stay with me, I want to be alone’, exposes the underbelly of art practice and the obsession to actually be with your work. In the film the artist interrupts herself, and is interrupted, yet she cannot leave; the studio is simultaneously a boat, a prison, and a garden of delight. Here we see the artist engrossed in her uncanny world of ghostly entities, the studio space having grown from a domestic setting of familiarity into a nightmarish space of alienation. *L’Interruptió* was shown at the Clay and Glass film festival in Montpellier, France.109

![Figure 32. Raimond de Weerdt and Fiona Fell, *La Interruptió* (film still) 2011](image)

The next film we had in preproduction was titled *The Illusion*, but it never materialised: here we would enter into an uncanny world where what we do as makers—as people who manipulate

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109 Every two years since 1998, the festival comprises two days of screenings of around 30 films: documentaries, fictional and animated films. It attracts around 1,500 festival-goers, film and craft professionals and enthusiasts, directors, producers, ceramic artists, glass artists, and gallery owners (See Works Cited: ‘FIFMA’).
material—is totally prohibited. In this world, everything would be digital. The main actor (me, although I was looking for a double at the time) would believe her sculptures were alive and would take them to the limits of subversive behaviour. On a visit to the radiographers—she wants to know them inside and out—she would place them in freezers and invert the firing process.

Figure 33. Fiona Fell, La Obra Perfecta with the Uncanny Poet (video still) 2013

La Obra Perfecta (The Perfect Work of Art, 2013, figure 28) constitutes another collaboration with de Weerdt, adding a script written by the literary scholar Maarten Renes. La Obra Perfecta takes its inspiration from the 1967 classic short The Perfect Human/Det Perfekte Menneske by Danish filmmaker Jørgen Leth,110 whose formal language inspired later work by the DOGMA111 school. Leth’s short is a much celebrated, ironic vision of the human being in an aseptic, post-

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110 *The Perfect Human* can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcbxMXKT2BM.

111 In their 1995 manifesto Dogme 95, Danish cinema directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg called for a return to traditional film-making away from the special-effect-based cinema Hollywood had been promoting. Their attempt to recover story, acting, and theme as the basic ingredients of good cinema was an attempt to prime the director as artist over the power of the studio and became known as the Dogma movement internationally.
war world of technological perfection, which ultimately leads to individual unhappiness: a Brave-New-World truth that the short’s visual and verbal language unveils and reveals. Whereas de Weerdt provided the cue of Leth’s film, this short was further informed by a classic 1960s text that I provided, which Renes turned into poetic-theatrical prompts using sonnet stanzas after producing a series of 24 sonnets based on viewing Leth’s short as a context for further work (see appendices). In The Psychology of Human Aging (1966), D. B. Bromley sequentially describes the stages involved in occupational and skilled performance. As they invoke the mechanical artificiality displayed in The Perfect Human and represent the idea of practice making perfect, after their poetic rewriting, de Weerdt and I used them as prompts to suggest a series of actions/clues for theatrical performance and improvisation. The result was put to music by de Weerdt and subsequently shown to Renes, who we asked to create and recite an accompanying voice-over text in Spanish based on the footage and provide its English subtitles. The content was deliberately left open and Renes turned this ‘post-script’ into a philosophical disquisition on artistic creation using the shadow of art. The voice-over was recorded at the Southern Cross University sound studio and subsequently synced to the subtitles by de Weerdt and Renes. Performed and shot in the studio, La Obra Perfecta refutes the idea of perfection in similar ways as its inspiration, and it continues the investigation of the links and limits between art and body, and of art as embodiment through an investigation of the shadow as their performative space-in-between. Without foregrounding any of the participants as the point of origin of the project but foregrounding artistic interaction as the main drive and rationale behind the project, it crystallises a collaborative artistic negotiation of different media and a flexible collective identity, incorporating three artists as one, trademarked as No Glaze No Glory.

Collaboration 5: Watershed

The data and image files created from the various scanning sessions act as a resource that are revisited and employed throughout many of my creative outputs. A significant outcome that draws on these scan data is a work made for a collaboration piece with sculptor-painter-designer André Martus and performance drawer Kellie O’Dempsey for the Watershed cultural studies.

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112 Bromley 1966: 177.
congress exhibition at the University of Barcelona, January 2014. A digital design program was used to develop and replicate a CAT scanning machine fabricated out of recycled cardboard (figures 28 & 29). This structural device housed video footage of a performance work in collaboration with O’Dempsey. Her practice of performative drawing amalgamates lyrical mark-making with digital technologies. In this instance the line drawn was projected onto my body while I was holding a sculpture; this revealed a form on a darkened background, merging the artist’s body and the body of art she is carrying. On an adjacent screen, an animated work of the sculpture being scanned through a CAT scanning machine uncovered the inside spaces of the sculpture as a fluid rhythmic gesture (figure 14, left and centre). The apparatus also held three figurative sculptures: one partial figure (waist to toes sliced in two), a head, and a full figure taking on the emotional state of the lived experience of scanning. Adding to the archive of scanning data, I used dental-scan images of my mouth, which holds in its bite a porcelain doll. The image was then digitally manipulated and rotated so the doll was standing upright and the teeth lost recognition through their vertical positioning, while the threat of a crushing presence was retained, which connects to the invasive penetration of radiation in the scanned body (figure 31, [right image]).
Figure 35. Fiona Fell and André Martus, *Interior Insight* (Autocat working design) 2014

Figure 36. Fiona Fell, *Watershed Sculpture* (exhibition catalogue) 2014
Collaboration 6: *Con/fusing Our Flesh*

A series of outcomes in progress involve sound and video recordings with new-media artist and academic Grayson Cooke, in which we draw on collaborative research archives and further explore the sensorial field of clay; sound profiles accompany the moving image to reflect the interiority of the making processes and qualities of the material itself. The most recent project in collaboration with Cooke also involves the musician and academic Matt Hill, whose post-production configures the soundscape in a quad configuration—a computer-generated soundscape. So far, it has resulted in a video short, recording a simulation of my figurative ceramic work and my body being scanned. The piece of work I engage with is no other than *Lones Marrow* (2013, figure 4), who/which I already engaged with in Chapter 1 as a transitional outcome of my research in ceramics. As figure 32 suggests, the frontiers between animate and inanimate matter are blurred as:

A laser mounted on a motion-control unit ‘scans’ across the artist and her work; post-processing using a frame echo effect is then used to render this temporal scan into a kind of frozen virtual sculpture. The artist merges with her work as both bodies are rendered equally functional as reflective surfaces for the highly concentrated light of the laser.114

What became apparent to me through this collaboration was the difference in stance in the writing and recalling of our joint experience. As a female, both the maker and holder of the figure, I was connected with the form on my flesh—I was naked. The weight of the work on my lap and the memory of nurturing the clay through to its final state were undoubtedly emotive. Grayson my collaborator, a new-media artist, manipulated the lasers as both an artist and technician, objectifying the task at hand, a form and subject to be reckoned with, almost as if a scientific procedure. An incredible excitement comes from the first viewing of what has been handed over in collaborations, what is the evolution in thought process and outcome from conversations and exchange in discipline. On watching the work presented of myself being

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scanned, a molten layer of red light that merged my body with my work, I felt acknowledged and understood, fortifying my relationship with collaborative practice-led methodologies.

Figure 37. Fiona Fell, *Lones Marrow and Fiona Fell* 2015

During this work, a further collaboration evolved with Matt Hill, the coordinator of music within the Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University. Through a sound mike, we recorded the sound of clay in various states of vitrification, from wet slip being poured to unfired clay, and fired clay of different temperatures. These recordings were then worked into a composition that accompanies the video. While the installation of this work is still being considered, the original work was shown at the Lismore Regional Gallery on a flat screen and was a finalist entry for the 2015 Portrait Prize. The footage forms part of my PhD exhibition in Brisbane but presented in installation format.

115 First awarded in 2010, ‘The Northern Rivers Portrait Prize is a painting and drawing prize open to artists whose artwork depicts a person from the Northern Rivers who the artist believes to be of value to their lives and/or to the community. This prize encourages artists from the Northern Rivers and Australia wide. Judged by Mr Philip Bacon, Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane. This Prize gives artists the chance to bring together the community through the representation and celebration of the people who make up this wonderful region’ (See Works Cited: ‘Northern Rivers Portrait Prize’).
Collaboration 7: *The Weight of Rain*

*The Weight of Rain*
An expectant sky bears down hard on the horizon
Wearing the grey furrowed brow of grief
It’s a comforting crocheted blanket
Settled over this too-flat earth
Covering us like the memories of our dead

A good place to hide for a while
But don’t stay under too long
The air disappears and all that remains is expired dioxide
And a little warm death in the dark

A grey fantail is caught in the storm
And alights on a railing in the shade
Then attempts a silent stasis towards recovery
One wet wing held in salute
To the impossible weight of rain

The atmosphere is visible today
A coat of gloaming to cover us
Encroaching the safety of the verandah
Settling glistening beads on leaves
Leaving a fine sheen of humidity everywhere

The North window shimmers with a grey reflection
Of a sky thick with the promise of more
While inside the rain soaked mattress
Absorbs everything we once were
Driving through the horizontal ghosts of the lowlands last night
Fog cobwebs cover the car and whisper their words;
‘What do we think the dead say to us,
when we stop to let them speak?’

The dead are in the trees around us
If only we could dare to look up
The car weaves its way through flood plains
As the soft breeze blows your voice out of my head
Our narrative ended abruptly
Leaving no possibility of resolution

This regret is caustic
It drips off devastated lips
Rots teeth from the inside out
And leaves hollow spaces
Where life had once been

The black salve on your heart corrodes a hole
As deep and wide as this search for meaning with no end
Because sometimes there are not enough words
There is only the weight of rain

Lynda Hawryluk 2015
Figure 38. Fiona Fell, *The Weight of Rain* 2011
This project is not a collaboration proper in that the resulting work was unified and constituted together. Rather one of my sculptures inspired a friend’s poem time after its making, though we did meet on different occasions to discuss both the piece and the poem’s meanings. The academic and poet Lynda Hawryluk wrote it in 2015 after she contemplated my sculpture the *Weight of Rain* (figure 33), which I had made in 2011. *The Weight of Rain*, as I explained to her, represents a bird caught in the rain, seeking a moment of respite to dry its wings. Hawryluk reflected on the way my sculpture sparked off inspiration for her poem in a recent essay, in which she explores the notion of grief. What she saw in my piece was very much the physical representation of intense loss and mourning, perceived as a kind of ghost, immaterial in that it represents that what no longer is—as Cixous argues, one cannot represent death—but material in that this absence becomes tangible:

When the bereaved talk and write about grief, it is sometimes described as a defined presence (Ellet 2013) and can take on the dimensions of a physical form – an unidentifiable size and shape that for some takes up the approximate vacuum left by the dead. Grief is in these instances a corporeal presence described as heavy, solid, intrusive.117

Hawryluk saw the sculpture I had created as a becoming aware of one’s limitations, the need to sit back and go with the flow in order to move forward rather than fight life’s current. Indeed, the sculpture filled a void created by the recent deaths of some intimate friends of the poet, and its title, reminiscent of destructive deluge and deep cleansing, offered her an entry into her own inability to give voice to her grief and loss. Hawryluk pays homage to my work by giving the poem the same title and takes its artistic content a parallel way. Grief and loss are, of course, important elements in my work, and Hawryluk’s connection to it is therefore not coincidental. As she explains:

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117 Hawryluk 2015: 2.
The sheer weight of rain creates stillness in the figure that is both within and without. The earth tones of the terracotta provide connection to the ground, with both knees firm and flat against it, buffering against the elements. They have the appearance of sinking into soil, but nevertheless are immovable. The figures face seems mute and resolute against this onslaught of precipitation, and there’s a sense of patience, of stubborn resolve to withstand what may come. It’s an admirable and strong figure, and yet tender and vulnerable. This underlying vulnerability is what drew me towards ‘The weight of rain’, along with the imagery of heaviness and a sense of inundation and deluge endemic in the title.\textsuperscript{118}

In Hawryluk’s poetic universe, rain becomes a metaphor for the tears shed over the loss of her friends and the intense grief this has caused her; logically, as the ‘weight’ of grief is a ‘burden’ and hard to carry, so does the rain represent an unbearable heaviness, connected to pain and suffering. The issue is how to ‘render mental pain bearable,’\textsuperscript{119} be it through the word or the image.

Her poem would resonate with me two years later when my studio and so much of my PhD work were severely affected by floods caused by heavy rainfall in Queensland, whose runoff found its destructive way to the Northern Rivers area and collapsed Lismore’s levy and the locals’ universe. My sense of loss was great, and the studio area beneath my house became a no-woman’s land for some months on end, an unwilling host to my ghosts of an unfired clay past. Yet, it also introduced a new stage of making in, and being made through, my practice that has led the way to a more organic, new materialist approach of embodiment, matter, and materiality, which I will address in Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{118} Hawryluk 2015, 5.
\textsuperscript{119} Akhtar quoted in Hawryluk 2015: 2.
Chapter 4: Constructing New Materialist Bodies of Art

For six months at the beginning of 2017, I undertook a visiting fellowship at the University of Barcelona to allow for an immersive engagement with my research. This was an intentional break from the studio practice I had not left alone for a considerable amount of time. At first, it was difficult not to be making and to be without a studio but in hindsight necessary to detach myself from default patterns of relating to my work. I had grown aware that many years of producing work for shows in commercial galleries had locked me into a format that I now found restrictive and problematic. My inability to orchestrate my work so as to reflect the complexities of my developing research interests left a chasm between my present location and where I needed to be to produce a cohesive body of work representing my new findings, which also included publishing papers within the framework of writing this exegesis. In *Craft Australia,* I wrote, ‘Making figurative sculpture for me is a constant negotiation of changeable terrain, sometimes under a deluge of unpredictable forces and natural disasters’¹²⁰ and this phrasing turned out premonitory. It was the non-human force and agency of water that would make me reshape my engagement with artistic and artist’s embodiment.

While I was abroad, my studio was almost completely wiped out in the April Fools floods of 2017 in Lismore, Northern NSW. Rising to a height of two metres and almost reaching the ceiling, floodwater destroyed a history of artefacts, journals, and drawings going back twenty years, a huge amount of unfired ceramic work, tables, shelves, books, art materials, tools and equipment for the production of my work. Yet, some sculptures which had been duly fired withstood the onslaught, remained in situ and survived, while others which had returned from a show in bubble-wrap had made their way safely out to the garden floating on their unintended life vests to become entangled in the branches of some of my trees, which had combed the receding waters and retained some treasures. Toxic and smelly sludge and dirt remained after the

¹²⁰ Fell 2011: 2.
water had disappeared, which a sympathetic student and family member of mine battled to eliminate after the catastrophe, assuring me there was no need for me to make my appearance and take control. I took their advice, and a sense of grief and loss remained in suspension while I was in Barcelona, but hit me seriously upon returning home in June that year when the gravity of it all became a three-dimensional reality unfiltered by the distancing flat virtual screen of social media. My seas of tears matched the weight of rain mentioned earlier.

I felt numbed by the loss of archive and identity, though part of me was grateful and relieved for not remembering what had become lost and what had survived. The survivors were wiped down maybe twice or three times, washed individually to remove a hardened brown residue from the floodwater. Looking for some kind of order, I placed these pieces in one big studio-scape on the length of three doors so that I could assess their possible participation in a larger story, what I envisaged as a sad staging of artist and work of art. The studio had become a site of disaster; it

Figure 3. Lismore studio post-deluge 2017
had become inhospitable and unfamiliar, a shadow of its past and a ghostly realm where only the memory of my cherished ‘little people’ dwelt. In the renegotiation of space, matter, and time, I was desperate to recover and fix my studio’s prior steady constellation and so condemned myself to a stifling state of mourning.

Yet, the praxis and reality of my studio involvement forced me onto a different, more inspiring path and pointed towards the becoming of a recuperative, performative rematerialization of artist and/as artwork as I slowly learnt to confront and come to terms with the situation. Rather than remaining in a state of grief over the irrecoverable loss of ‘unique’, ‘irreplaceable’ artistic outcome resultant from a discrete creative process which separates the artist’s body from the body of art, I engaged in a performative hands-on interplay with these altered materialities to discover their new forms and uses. In short, the detritus forged by the deluge and which I was forced to clean up, tidy, discard, or recycle opened up novel ways of dealing with embodiment in an interplay that was both performative and material. The process redefined the relationship between the artist’s body and matter as what Barad defines as ‘intra-action’ rather than interaction\textsuperscript{121}, allowing for the art’s and artist’s materiality to shape-shift into a non-essential, continuous work-of-art-in-the-making—as if it were a never-ending series of material snapshots in the ongoing flux of matter and form which offers itself up as art to the observer.

**Quantum Physics and Materialist Binaries**

Taking her cue from quantum physics, Barad coins the term ‘intra-act’ to undercut the inside/outside, agent/patient, and subject/object binaries traditionally associated with materialism and its dialectics. Thus, she follows up on the inseparability of the ‘observed object’ and its ‘agencies of observation,’\textsuperscript{122} which is associated with so-called *phenomena*. The latter are performative occurrences or events on the quantum physics level in which one perceives not a solid object in a fixed place but a joint configuration of matter and/as energy, with no precise but probable location in space—we are speaking of some sort of ‘spectral’ materialisation that

\textsuperscript{121} Barad 2003: 815.
\textsuperscript{122} Barad 2003: 814.
appears to us without definite shape or location and while ‘there’, must forever stay out of reach. What we attempt to apprehend as an object (of art) wavers as its existence is informed by our standpoint and bodily intervention as much as by matter’s response to these so that the result could be likened to a shadow rather than full presence as matter, a remainder or trace of a ‘ghostly’ existence that is im/material. Barad claims a paradigmatic shift in the perception of matter and argues that it is through non-hierarchical intra-action (in our case in the performative contact between the artist’s body and art’s matter, no longer distinguishable as separate entities but co-constitutive in fleshing out a ‘body of art’) that we ‘see’ a phenomenon ‘incorporate’ into specific local contexts while remaining shifty in shape and out of reach because of its non-essential characteristics:

The notion of intra-action (in contrast to the usual ‘interaction,’ which presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata) represents a profound conceptual shift. It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the ‘components’ of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful. A specific intra-action (involving a specific material configuration of the ‘apparatus of observation’) enacts an agential cut (in contrast to the Cartesian cut—an inherent distinction—between subject and object) effecting a separation between ‘subject’ and ‘object.’ That is, the agential cut enacts a local resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy.123

Barad’s theorisation of a new materialism beyond discrete binaries is applied to concrete examples of art by Amelia Jones, who recovers the Marxist notion of labour to add value to a work of art. She highlights:

... a new mode of hybrid practices that draws on a legacy of body, conceptual, and installation art to render new complex art experiences that are performative yet exist in various material forms (including, arguably, that of the artist’s laboring body). Such works show the limits of old methods of interpretation, whether art historical or curatorial

123 Barad 2003: 815.
(generally speaking, invested in final ‘products’ as made by intentional agents called artists) or based in performance studies’ tendency to emphasize process and narrative content or to claim ‘authenticity’ for the performing live body.\textsuperscript{124}

Jones is careful to point out that any subordination of matter to human action and intent is a flawed path as it establishes its own dynamics of making by intra-acting with the artist’s bodily materiality and labour. Jones’s prime example of such a novel hybrid practice is the experiential performances/bodily engagements of the Los-Angeles-based transgender bodybuilder/artist Heather Cassils with clay. The latter is a medium that for its ductility and quasi-human weight and density lends itself perfectly for a merger of solid matter and the performative beyond a Marxist dialectic that would invest in final outcome and the artist’s bodily engagement in it as discrete, separate entities. As Jones highlights:

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\text{… the kind of art that interests me here [is] art that is not lodged in or as only a final object, but that, in its performativity, also involves materialities clearly manipulated and foregrounded, with the processes of artistic making indicated or marked through these materialities.}\textsuperscript{125}
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Thus, Jones uses Cassils’ performance of pummelling a huge quantity of clay into (a) shape so as to break through the artificial juxtaposition of the work of art as material outcome and bodily involvement as ephemeral performance, and to:

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\text{… explore [-] a new mode of contemporary art that cannot be fully understood solely through formalism or structural analyses (its hybrid and performative nature makes such analyses less than useful as there is no single final product to be examined) nor through performance theory’s emphasis on ephemeral action (the materiality of the work is its key site of activity, and its transformation is key to the experience).}\textsuperscript{126}
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\textsuperscript{124} Jones 2015: 20.
\textsuperscript{125} Jones 2015: 20.
\textsuperscript{126} Jones 2015: 20.
Jones’ analysis of Cassils’ bodily engagement in/with/through clay has inspired me in my efforts to steer clear and away from the traditional wear and tear of one of the world’s oldest, most material art forms—ceramics. Jones’ discussion has enabled me to recognise the physical impact of the deluge as an opportunity to break new ground and taken me out of the comfort zone of self-pitying grief and hurt artistic pride. Conceptually speaking, the work that is now to feature in my PhD exhibition, with the working title ‘Un/comfortable Bodies’, builds on the material mutations of/in, rather than replaces the previous oeuvre, as it incorporates in the intra-active flux of labour, body and matter.

Un/comfortable Bodies of Art

Most of the earlier work that was destroyed in the deluge included unfired clay—experiments and propositions that always remained a glance away from where I wanted to take my practice, but informing my process of making in the way the material held the memory of its handling. Before the loss of these items, I was not aware of how significant these in-between moments of
making had become over time. Unvitrified clay is free from commitment, unstable, impermanent, and full of potential—a rich playground in which matter and labour intra-act and constitute each other’s bodies. After months of digesting the loss of these works and recreating a workable studio environment, I started to give more emphasis to these in-between pieces. I brought raw clay and unresolved output to the foreground and made it participant in an ongoing enquiry that aimed to process and come to terms with the discomforting, defamiliarizing effects of the overbearing ‘weight of rain’ on my studio life.

Figure 41. Fiona Fell, *Sculpture in Entropy* (post-deluge) 2017

If I had been present for the direct aftermath of the flood, I would have photographically documented the traces of detritus and the collapse of unfired ceramic sculptures in an advanced state of material entropy. This lack notwithstanding and perhaps precisely because of it, the non-human interaction, chaotic ordering and uncanny placement of objects and substances caused by the deluge and the human interference with these effects in its aftermath triggered a more bodily
involvement with my studio space. Thus, it became a significant platform for new possibilities and installation strategies that would rewrite my grief over loss, allow me to regain the terrain lost and so to set foot again in my former playground. Making the space my own again by repurposing the damaged, affected material and letting it speak to and for me turned the disaster into a blessing in disguise. I put wet books to dry and no longer the bearers of disclosable textual and visual information they turned into the recycled building stones of a new way ahead, a new artistic home of sorts.

I retrieved a collection of X-ray images from the flood and separated the prints, which became a suggestive exercise of re-interpreting material that while damaged was still indispensable in that it put my transgressive and transformational potential to the test. As it turned out, the floodwater had eroded the chemical surfaces and shifted the images, some bleeding through to the sheets below, which intriguingly had created images of disfigured bone structures. If we stretch this into the posthuman/ist context and take water as a life-giving, shaping force, what has come to the

Figure 42. Fiona Fell, Drying X-rays (post-deluge) 2017
fore through this re-interpretation of imagery is a non/human collaborative practice-led methodology worth integrating into the exhibition, alongside other objects that were manipulated by the penetrating force of the water and so found a new purpose.

The exhibition layout now embraces the logic of my studio being affected by the flood. The performative interaction of displaced objects and studio equipment have suggested new ways of installing, thus challenging and questioning the way I (and others) have habitually staged sculpture. The structural devices in the exhibition combine tables, plinths, studio furniture, grafted and bandaged onto medical equipment holding up objects, found materials and figurative elements, thus creating a novel context for situating objects, material characteristics, interchangeable features, insights, and commonalities. The medical equipment reminds of the damage done to the pieces and harks back to the initial discomfort experienced by the artist as the maker. This, however, is undermined by the repair implicit in the presence of the medical equipment such as metal hospital stretchers, which plays out the uncanny tension generated by the interplay of destruction and salvation, life and death, and calls for a new role of the artist as an intra-active agent.

I have entitled my PhD exhibition *Un/comfortable Bodies* to cater for a trajectory that has taken my bodily and conceptual engagement with the matter of clay from the fearful, challenging estrangement of the Freudian uncanny to the indefinite dark-grey area of Perniola’s shadow, then to the ambiguous non/existence of Derrida’s ghost/revenant and finally to Barad and Jones’s indeterminacy of the intra-active im/material art phenomenon. The exhibition, designed for the POP Gallery space, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane, merges six distinct spaces which expand into new modes of bodily hybridity informed by conceptual and installation art so as to render an art experience that draws on the ‘becoming’ of the performative yet exists in the ‘being’ of various material forms at the same time.

**Installation 1: Silent Partners**

The film collaboration discussed in Chapter 3, Collaboration 3, *La Obra Perfecta*, is a philosophical reflection on artistic embodiment that I revisit, but now also stages the main
character of the film, The Uncanny Poet, outside the projection screen, incorporating the virtual image to solid matter, moving the intra-action among the different players from the two to the three-dimensional space and complicating the standpoint of the gaze. An extra shadow is cast by the video’s inanimate character and sets up a visual dialogue reinforcing the theme of the shadow ‘as the repository of difference’. It also harks back to the engagement of the collaborator through the clay portrait of Maarten Renes, who contributed poetic scripts at various stages of the making of this short (see Appendices). Further possibilities for interaction arise from the viewers’ changing positionality in the projection area, creating shadows that engage with the flow of projection and address the agency of the spectator in the establishment of meaning.

As the original footage was shot at the very beginning of my PhD research, my aim with this installation is to reimagine the video short within the context of ‘Un/comfortable Bodies’ in order to establish a more profound interpretation of how shadows matter and engage the gaze, especially when the sculptural object acquires uncanny agency. Previous projects incorporating new-media collaborations aimed to deconstruct the sensorial qualities of the materials used in order to facilitate hybrid, post-hylomorphic interpretations on the basis of a processual engagement of the artist with her work, defined by Jones as a threefold ‘performative conception of the artist/self as in process, commodifiable as art object, and intersubjectively related to the audience/interpreter’. My appearance in the video as a co-protagonist is juxtaposed to the animate character of the Uncanny Poet, who intra-acts with my body and shadow in the footage to materialise finally outside the screen and take the dialogue from the virtual to the real, questioning standpoint, bodily presence and artistic materialisation.

Installation 2: Slip & Spill

Once back in Australia after my Europe sojourn, physically affected by jet lag and emotionally exhausted by the creative wasteland under my house, I made any return to my studio space questionable for some time by symbolically amputating myself. I managed to injure both of my

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127 Perniola 2004a: 63.
128 Jones 2015: 12.
hands, one with an awkward fall in my studio by slipping on a wet spot, which in turn led to scalding the other with boiling water, as I was not able to hold the kettle. In an ironic twist of fate, water, a medium traditionally associated with the feminine and the procreative, had affected me again and made it impossible for me to recover my practice. While I was uncomfortable and unconfident in the alienating studio environment, the dilemma of not being able to use my hands for the creative process further distressed me. My very hands, the tools that made my trade and art possible, could no longer perform the tasks set out for them. My bodily perception was severely altered, so that I could no longer serve myself of the phenomenological approach that has always signified my bodily investment in ceramic art’s making—the direct engagement between myself, my body, and clay matter in which the body of art constitutes itself. My manual injuries had left me at a considerable remove from the sensitivity of Merleau-Ponty’s tactile universe in which:

... my right hand [could] touch[-] my left hand while it is palpating the things, where the ‘touching subject’ passes over to the rank of the touched, descends in to things, such that the touched is formed in the midst of the world and as it were in the things.129

I had reached a phase where I could not feel and handle my art any longer, and I needed a second, protective skin to negotiate my return to the space of creation, a harder skin that mediated between my grief over loss and my need to move on. This would be provided by my collection of robust work gloves, which I use for firing, handling wood firing kilns, and carrying hot objects. Gloves serve to protect and comfort hands against all sort of harmful exterior influences—cold or heat; damage by friction, abrasion or chemicals; and disease; they provide a guard for what a bare, sensitive hand, symbol of my pain, should not touch. I chose the most generous of water vessels to stage my desire to shed and renew my damaged skin as an artist: I filled up a bathtub with gloves rendered in slip, which spilled into a shapeless puddle on the floor underneath the tub. Their repetitious placement in the tub expose the hard labour of my hands as extension of my eyes in my art, boasting as many gloves as there were tasks but ultimately questioning its results as they lose themselves in the shapeless slip that spills over the tub’s rim.

Could this shrine to my physical implication in art lead to any healing?

129 Merleau-Ponty 1968:133-34.
The bath: a bodily space, a welcoming matrix, a nurturing shelter but also a void, a sarcophagus, a crypt—a site of safety, seduction, surrender, and suicide. As a child, I would hide in the bath, filled with water or not, as I found the protection of its shape a comfort. Still nowadays it represents a place of seclusion, relaxation and recovery to me, which takes me back to the peace and quiet I would find on my daily, solitary excursions as a teenager to Marshall Falls, an almost uncharted pristine pool and waterfall hidden on the outer limits of my parents’ property in Alstonville, Northern Rivers. It is where my existential discomfort found some kind of ease, where my trajectory in art began taking shape, against the madness of an estranged home.

The labouring body of the artist, in need of artistic catharsis and ritual cleansing, is omnipresent in ‘Un/comfortable Bodies’. The imprint of gloves, symbol of hard work and effort, fossilises in slip spilling in an uncanny movement beyond the tub’s very borders onto the floor below, provoking a sense of post-performance debris that alludes to the bodily involvement in the installation’s making. The materiality of clay is exposed in its most vulnerable state—before firing, when the fluid qualities are evident, in need to be held or contained by a mould with a restraining boundary. Matter flows into form, but shape is not necessarily retained and remains in flux. Thus, the installation comments on Amelia Jones’s argument that:

... art can *work* or perform itself through another angle — that of materialities (including those of the labouring bodies of making and engaging with art’s stuff). The limits of Marxist or neo-Marxist theories of labour are clear in relation to art: they do not interrogate how the materialities of art *themselves work*. new materialist theory provides a key method to examine how the complex of materialities in the art ‘works’ to produce endlessly shifting meanings and values.\(^{130}\)

\(^{130}\) Jones 2015: 23, her emphasis.
Figure 43. Fiona Fell, Bathtub with Gloves (detail) 2017
Installation 3: *Impulse and Momentum*

In the exhibition, I also display studio experiments with a variety of materials on medical and industrial trolleys, suggestive of embodied forms in a state of flux. These works evolve and devolve constantly throughout the preparation for the PhD exhibition and navigate their way throughout the assigned spaces. They are forever unfinished and carry the impulse and momentum of their fluid materiality into the flexibility of their placement. Thus, the spine experiments have developed from images of X-rayed spines and re-examine the integration of the scan image into the sculptural elements of the work. This installation juxtaposes itself to the ‘spinelessness’ of the previous one, which comments on the fluidity of clay matter. The execution of the idea involved some complexities as I was looking to achieve a suggestion of backbone, resilience and steady shape rather than too obvious and blatant a visual statement. An early attempt was to incorporate decals of X-rays fired back onto the ceramic surface, but the results were unimpressive because too literal. I then used the bones of a horse spine and sacrum, laid in cloth and poured with plaster. The black plastic lining of the box mould marked the surface of the black background, and an image had arrived that was suggestive and convincing, reminiscent of a shadow. I then followed this up by pressing large slabs of clay into the spine form, in which the clay ‘fleshed out’ around the bone and suggested muscle and tendon tissue. Experiencing how my body of art reconstituted itself, I recovered a sense of my own body and self in a novel language of visual and material expression.

In Barad’s and Jones’s reworking of new materialism and the artistic, materialities include human bodies/subjects, which affect one another in a continual way. It offers pertinent avenues to rethink how hybrid art works, and in particular how to do this by creating, in turn, hybrid methods across performance and art theory, methods that are themselves performative as they implicate themselves with matter at the site of creation. Barad presents us with a ‘relational ontology’ beyond the metaphysical separation of ‘words’ and ‘things’, language and matter, mind and body that, instead, makes them constitutive of each other. She argues that:

On an agential realist account, it is once again possible to acknowledge nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming without resorting to the optics of
transparency or opacity, the geometries of absolute exteriority or interiority, and the theoretization of the human as either pure cause or pure effect while at the same time remaining resolutely accountable for the role ‘we’ play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming.\textsuperscript{131}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{spinal_imprint_2017.jpg}
\caption{Fiona Fell. \textit{Spinal Imprint} 2017}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{131} Barad 2003: 812.
I found that Barad’s words point forward to an artistic space of collaboration between artist and art that converges in the benefit provided by the labour of the artist’s body and her sensibility and the way matter responds to these in an ongoing dialogue of material and conceptual intra-action. Performance is not completely ephemeral nor creative outcome completely material, but they morph into and out of shape in mutual intra-action.

**Installation 4: *Body Boundaries***

This collaborative installation presents my latest collaboration with video artist and academic Grayson Cooke. I refer back to Chapter 3, Collaboration 5 for details on the groundwork. Suffice it to say here that in this particular set-up two video monitors lean on each other and create a dialogue around *Lones Marrow’s* and my own body’s presences on a big screen, blurring our separate materialities under the inquisitive cut of a laser-beam of bloody, red light (2015, figure 32 & 40). The separation between the inanimate and the animate is questioned by the unifying red monochrome light that extracts our materialities from a shadowy background and blurs our limbs and trunks as if they were one and the same organism. Cooke’s penetrating male gaze, symbolised by the laser-beam, is unable to categorise our joint being into separate entities and, though invasive, does not succeed in severing *Lones’* and my vital connection.

Figure 45. Fiona Fell, *Lones Marrow and Me* 2015
Installation 5: *The Survivors*

My decision to video the deluge’s survivors on a table was once again a way of dematerialising my cluttered field of objects through the use of new media and to come to terms with my uncanny ghosts. With this work, I took inspiration from Janine Burke’s 2006 publication *The Gods of Freud*, an analysis of Freud’s collection of figurative, sculptural antiquities in the Freud Museum in London, which hosts work by artists in response to his collection. Burke steers clear of the common view of Freud as a ‘godless Jew’ but reveals him as a deeply spiritual man who believed that the present only becomes real and makes sense by associating it to the past—we all have to come to terms with our ghosts in order to move on, a process that is often uncanny in the self’s confrontation with deeply-seated fears, and this is a focus close to my marrow.

Freud collected some 2,500 objects—largely ‘statues, urns, bowls, parchments and even mummy bandages’—which acquired a life of their own in his study and consultancy as he moved them around, rearranged them to commune with them, and made them witness to and participant in his writing, suggestively set ‘amid the smoke and lamplight’. Freud’s animistic beliefs imbued his collection with its true life and soul, taking issue with Western science and religion as the major influences on human nature. Given the importance that Freud’s investigation of the uncanny has had in my work, I find his obsession with figurines fascinating, as it ties in so strongly with my own ‘little people’ who commune with me in manifold ways and embody my fears and obsessions.

Others have noticed these links too. One of the artists in residence at the museum, UK ceramic artist Christie Brown, installed a body of work titled *DreamWork* in November 2012. This body of work considered the relationship between archaic artefacts and a contemporary ceramic art practice. Brown used materials such as clay, wax, and plaster to explore ways in which objects come to hold symbolic significance. She created a whole host of characters, including strange unearthly creatures, bust forms, and large parties of figurines inspired by ancient Egyptian

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132 Hayward 2006.
Fiona Fell
Un/comfortable Bodies

statues, which appealed to my imagination and my own urge to hoard my house with figurines of all sorts.

Griselda Pollock’s 2007 study, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminists Museum: Time, Space and the Archive*, uses Freud’s museum as a resource for feminist cultural analysis, which has also been an inspiration for me. Freud could not stand being stared at all day and was uncomfortable with his gaze being returned. Thus, he started using his collection as a buffer between himself and the patient. His figurines played a vital role in his approach of psychoanalysis, heavily bent upon primaeval symbologies, as they captured and inverted the male gaze:

They were embodied memories-sculptures attesting to figuration as corporealised thoughts, fears and imaginings, all the better to lure us with the object’s questioning gaze, a gaze that held open before Freud the enigmas of what their human makers had crafted into these surrogate, suggestive, myth/bearing forms of human others.\(^{133}\)

Lastly, Chris Marker’s and Alain Resnais’ 1953 film collaboration *Les Statues meurent aussi* (*Even Sculptures Die*) feeds into this installation. The film was shot in the post-WWII period of general decolonisation, and so against the backdrop of the fast decline of the French Empire and the still pervading superiority that the French mainstream invested in itself. As it ‘strives to connect the death of the statue with the rise in the commercialisation of African art for the pleasure of the French colonial classes’,\(^ {134}\) the film points out how ‘black art becomes a dead language’ as the narrating voice affirms. Under the imposition of Christian civilisation as well as Islamic influence, which forbids the use of the effigy in religion, it claims that African art shown in major European anthropological museums of the 1950s is taken out of context, stuck into static primitivism and therefore ‘killed’. The viewer looks into the dead eyes of African heads, faces and masks through the camera lens just long enough to notice how the steady flow of images subversively animates the sculptures and returns our scrutinising colonising gaze, unsettling us by their uncanny presence:

\(^ {133}\) Pollock 2007: 86.
\(^ {134}\) Chamarette 2009.
Death pervades the extraordinarily attentive images of the film, which rest just a fraction of a second too long upon the broken faces and distended eyes, lips and teeth of African masks, tools and religious artefacts, at once abstract and unnervingly real. This fraction of a second transforms scrutiny into discomfort, always threatening to reanimate the African statuary that has already been made dead, and thus, ‘safe’, by virtue of its meticulous labelling and placement behind glass in the museum.\(^{135}\)

This uncanny reversal of the gaze is introduced straight at the beginning of the film when a few museum visitors look into the camera as if they were observing a statue, the last one being a young woman of mixed African-European descent apparently negotiating her mixed heritage. The film’s location in times of major decolonisation in Africa draws attention to the power of the gaze and ‘subtly implies that because we look we are complicit in the events of the present and the past’,\(^{136}\) and thus demands we stare back from disenfranchised angles. This intention also coincides with the discursive drift of *La Obra Perfecta*, which draws all protagonism to the inanimate *Uncanny Poet* and establishes his gaze as my I/Eye and shadow recede into the wall on which the sculpture projects its presence.

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\(^{135}\) Chamarette 2009.

\(^{136}\) Chamarette 2009: 3.
Installation 6: *Un/comfortable Partners*

A final creative project to accompany my exegesis was undertaken when I returned to the University of Barcelona late 2017, early 2018. This work contributed to a group exhibition curated by myself and Dr Jaime de Córdoba, who is the Head of the Sculpture Division at Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Barcelona. The exhibition, entitled *Otherings*, included fifteen emerging and established artists from Europe and Australia with varied perspectives and agendas that reflected on the conference theme for the European Association for Studies of Australia Biennial Conference 2018. This event, entitled *Nationalism Old and New Europe, Australia and their Others*, dealt with matters of identity in the face of more restrictive and harsher treatment of immigration and ethnic minorities in the European and Australian continents-cum-nation spaces.

Figure 47. Jeff Lynn and Fiona Fell, *Rooftop Shoot 2018*

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This was an intense work period reintroducing collaborative and performative methodologies. Besides curating, my contribution to the exhibition was a three-day performance exposing the confrontation of homelessness and impoverishment with emblematic spaces of academic power and wealth within the University of Barcelona’s main building in the old city centre: its *Aula Magna*, which boasts important seventeenth century paintings from El Prado Museum in Madrid, including some Rubens; the so-called Paranymph, a lush, church-like noble hall for official ceremonies that holds large frescos depicting the intimate connections between Empire, discovery, and academic pursuit; and the Noble Passage, which hosted the art show and connects both previous spaces and offers access to the university library. In this monumental environment, I inserted a homeless presence who dwelt in two sleeping bags that I sewed together, changed shape and moved around different spaces within the exhibition. My collaborator Jess Flynn and I performed with the sleeping bags in different locations to get a sense of the idea’s potential.

The installation responds to the intense relationship between the roles of the giver and taker of hospitality, which are interchangeable and converge upon each other, as we have seen in my previous discussion. They are basic to our Self/Other relationship, and their sociality also draws us into the uncanny, as guests are unhomely strangers and manifest themselves as f(r)iends—potential friends or enemies, and so are cause for alienation and discomfort. The performance stages a displaced and homeless person within the exhibition site that would not usually welcome or host such a guest. Having no doors or formal access control, this particular institutionalised space is porous to the outside, to the margins, to those without a/the place. While the word university indicates a space open to all, this is far from true, as access is in reality restricted to the privileged. The amorphous shape-shifting sleeping bag, a chrysalis containing human form, tries to find its place among the works of art but remains othered as conference delegates, local academics, students, office personnel, maintenance staff, and visitors try to negotiate passage. Video footage was taken to capture a perspective from the ground up, people’s feet, legs walking toward and away and most significantly, the gaze back, the moment the viewer doubts and is compelled to look again. Here my aim was to establish a relationship with the onlookers that played on the Freudian uncanny in the impossibility to tell whether the human form in the sleeping bag was a doll come alive or a human turned corpse, and so to question society’s engagement with the disenfranchised.
Installation 7: Many Others

Preproduction for the *Un/comfortable Partners* performance generated some powerful images in the rooftop setting of my Barcelona home, which I developed later within the collaborative framework of the *No Glaze No Glory* artistic partnership. This powerful final creative output consolidates my main concerns in the trajectory that has revealed itself through the course of my PhD research. The performance work was collaborative and therefore generated multiple outcomes and possibilities not only for the exhibition *Otherings* itself but also for future projects. Moving through the embodiment of the performance with an intra-active approach, we documented a series of animated forms that merge into one whole when seen from a distance on the large photographic print of one by one metre. Coming closer to the print this unity fragments into what first seems an unreadable and unknown script, but finally gives way to isolated images of animate shapes haunted by their shadows. The clay arch placed within view of the image is a form of potentiality for any maker and connects the viewer with the gesture of making within the material of clay, which has surrendered its purpose solely for its transformation. This concluding project of my PhD research invigorates and reconnects me with the uncanny materiality of my practice and body of/as work, and brings this discussion of my practice’s development to its conclusion.

Figure 48. Fiona Fell and Raimond de Weerdt, Many Others 2018
Conclusion: Artistic Embodiment and its Dis/Comforts

‘Das Unbehagen der Skulptur’ — ‘Sculpture and Its Discontents’

1. Clay creation comes from dire discontent
   A Freudian fountain of inspiration
   In vain you curb civil malcontent
   Through your ceramic soul’s sublimation

2. The people that your desires invent
   The fiercest crowd of your imagination
   They burst from your body busily bent
   Upon expressing fires of frustration

3. Your sharper ear and sharpest eye
   Shape discomfort’s depth in art’s expression
   Dis-ease belies a harrowed heart’s lie
   Its mould can’t spoil sculptural obsession

4. Shapes and forms don’t fail to draw in
   And dare defy comfort’s vexed veneer
   But as death’s harbinger’s next of kin
   They pursue with pain the nude now and here

5. They people your brain with hot-burning thought
   They linger on limits alive yet unknown
   They feel contained and crushed and caught
   They must shout out, their discontent shown

6. Your female face may brighten in bliss
   But deeper down lurks darker fear
   What is in our minds’ universe amiss?
   Your clay-scapes unleash it loud and clear

7. In love we ought to look for oceans
   And blur the limiting boundaries of selves
   So skirt lonely feelings, surf deep sensations

8. Our world’s a wishing well of emotion
   Where man may float and drift or drown
   Where waves of love will keep life in motion
   Where difference effaced forms a lasting crown

9. A hard ideal to harden to matter
   Pleasure’s principle hails from the horizon
   Yet raw reality your wishes may shatter
   Too little’s achieved and lacks unison

10. We can only make do and do make so much
    To keep control of our suffering mood
    Through loving closeness in physical touch
    Doubt and division must always brood

11. Bruised feelings form our battle field
    They fight to embody, to incorporate
    To convention’s pressure they shan’t yet yield
    Burst forward they must, ere sooner than late

12. So sing, sensorial field of clay
    A mouldable mass of emotions and thought
    Its shapeless weight shan’t morph more astray
    In the craft of sculpture our dis-ease is caught...

Barcelona, 29 February 2016—Maarten Renes.138

138 © Maarten Renes 2013. Reproduced with author’s permission.
Coming ‘Home’

This exegesis traces an artistic trajectory which became firmly established within the field of ceramic sculpture two decades ago, with national and international recognition for my figurative clay art by peers, curators, buyers, art galleries and museums, both following on and leading to multiple art residencies at home and abroad. However, unforeseen family circumstances pulled me back to my hometown in Northern Rivers NSW, Australia, where I settled into a university job in 3D. For various reasons, what I had conceived of as a temporary return to my roots turned into a long-term engagement, and I have been working in local academia combining art teaching, research, and practice ever since the late 1990s. Nevertheless, the paths I had been exploring prior to this had indicated another, less conventional artistic career away from small-town provincialism, and artistic freedom and experiment always beckoned at my horizon. What I have taken for a certain dis-ease caused by conformity has always formed part of my emotional make-up, and has haunted me more intensely ever since my return ‘home’, a place of female domesticity where I do not and yet belong. This discomfort has reflected in my clay sculpture from the past two decades; however, it has also prompted me to investigate new avenues of making, including interdisciplinary collaboration across new media, performance, and the installation work, the result of which I have laid down in this exegesis and its accompanying exhibition in Brisbane.

Revelling in Emotion: Revealing the Uncanny

I dedicate the first chapter of my exegesis to the uncanny nature of my earlier work: a quality that has never diminished and structurally informs my subsequent artistic development, and that can also be understood to inform the oeuvre of famous female artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Paula Rego, and Judith Wright. The uncanny is a key concept in the way I understand my work as it draws attention to its psychological aspects, the way I give shape to human emotion in the conversation with non-human matter. By visualising and incorporating these emotions, these wishes, desires, fears and traumas on the hardened, glazed surfaces of my sculptures, I defy the discrete separation between inside and outside that the ceramic skin represents, and make it porous to the female gaze. Thus, I deconstruct an essentialist binary that is deeply entangled in
our perception and definition of Self and Other and aim to undo the emotional comfort zone that keeps people stuck in their routine. Viewers tend to find my pieces confronting in their expression of raw feeling. My relationship with my ‘little people’ is not rational but empathetic, and their clay matter communes with me in their making—as if I give birth to them and animate them. As I explain in this first chapter, they ‘speak’ to me, visit, and haunt me at night with their obsessions, needs, requests, and demands. This intimate relationship, in which I ‘intra-act’ with clay matter as Barad would have it,\(^\text{139}\) also opens the way for the new materialist investigations I have engaged in ever since the floods that interrogated and reconfigured my Lismore studio space and exegesis focus and work.

As Chapter 1 attests, the uncanny effects of my sculptures have been pointed out by various informed observers, not least by Sonia Legge, who was employed by Watters Gallery in Sydney, and by drawer and designer Lyndall Adams, who is currently employed in art education at Edith Cowan University and forms part of its ethics committee. Freud’s reading of the uncanny as a fringe concept where meaning folds back on itself, where the homely (G: \textit{Heimlich}) becomes unhomely (G: \textit{Unheimlich}), when repressed traumatic knowledge from one’s childhood manifests itself, is of particular relevance in my art. In addressing the scary effects of defamiliarization, Freud moves into the domestic, a terrain that since Modernity has been defined as safe, private and homely but also threatening as it is a woman’s space unknown to men. In the manifestation of the uncanny, the homely becomes a ‘dark continent’—a term resulting from nineteenth-century colonial exploits to denote Sub-Saharan Africa, whose interior was uncharted by the West and so considered to be ‘kept in the dark’. Freud takes this racist colour metaphor into the sexual to signify the male perception of female sexuality as a menace,\(^\text{140}\) and so confirms Cixous’ gendered reading of the uncanny, which connects it to the fear and destruction of death vis-a-vis the confirmation of life and pro/creation. Cixous’ analysis proffers the possibility to see the a-legal promiscuity of the uncanny as the key to the reshaping and resignification of inanimate matter as it spills over laterally across into the grey, shadowy area of adjacent and—ultimately--opposed meaning. My argument here is that the uncanny can be applied to question male hierarchies and divisive, discrete binaries that inform discursive gaps in reality, justifying

\(^{139}\) Barad 2003: 814.
\(^{140}\) See Works Cited: ‘Dark Continent’.
practices of oppression. By questioning fixed meaning, the uncanny may connect us to discourses that are potentially subversive and create liminal spaces for other ways of being, of cultural difference.

The regular, yearly exhibition of my sculptural work in Sydney’s oldest, renowned contemporary art gallery, Watters, has always underlined the discrete individuality of my pieces and never allowed for the display of more complex configurations of making. It has, nevertheless, been a fruitful commercial venue for my work that is now—perhaps felicitously—coming to an end due to its programmed closure at the end of 2018. Despite having been a great promoter of contemporary art, Watters Gallery’s set-up has always been traditional and outlived itself by looking at the work of art in isolation rather than its multiple connections to the time and place of its making. The Indefinite Densities show (2013) attests to this format, and so does the Imperfect Friends exhibition of 2016 (figures 5–9), which takes the raw display of the emotional on the surface of my sculptures to its extreme, but once again, within the physical and discursive confines of the pieces themselves. In a way, my engagement with Watters Gallery and the format they work with has come full circle, and their impending closure is an opportunity for me to move on and find venues more appropriate for the creative paths I have been exploring. The pieces Lones Marrow and The Uncanny Poet (2015, figure 32 & 40) came into existence to interact with the viewer, the first by sitting on a chair in public spaces, mingling with the crowd and returning the gaze to the onlooker, and the second by participating in the video La Obra Perfecta by the art collective No Glaze No Glory (2013). This exegesis exhibition and the interdisciplinary collaboration with performance drawer Kellie O’Dempsey programmed at Lismore’s Regional Art Gallery for September 2018 mean to pave the way to the display of other embodiments of the artist and/as art.

Moving into the In/hospitable: the Aura, the Shadow and the G/host

The next section, Chapter 2, traces my first excursions into new media by way of scanning, in an effort to dissolve and make porous the hard confines of my ceramic pieces and uncover the shadow worlds within, so close to living human form and yet different. My firsts incursions into scanning with Adams only involved flatbed scanning, which was suggestive of 3D but could not
compete with the depth and animation delivered by X-ray scanning. It was my subsequent hospital scanning exploits with radiographer Caroline Ainsworth that made it possible to invert the gaze and move from art’s manifestation on the outside, as an externalising process that re/creates the discrete borders of the body, to an area of bodies in conversation and of matter in flux. It was surprising in the clinical hospital setting to note the similarities between human bone and fired clay, revealed as a white shadow under X-rays exposure, which took my engagement with art as the object of individual creation out of the binary realm of human agency and subjectivity versus non-human patience and objectification. The process of making had started to move towards a mutual reconfiguration of bodily matter, a conversation of reciprocal becoming in the act of making.

The hospital as the setting of this investigation added to a growing, new understanding of my work achieved by scan technology, as it took me back to a Derridean deconstruction of what hospitality means and how it informs our binary perception of Self and Other—a ‘stranger’ who may as easily be a friend or an enemy. Just as the uncanny, then, hospitality is a concept that etymologically folds back onto itself through the merger of the Latin roots hostis (enemy) and hospes (host, friend), suggesting an ambivalent space that is both hospitable and inhospitable. The basic ambiguity of the hospital as a welcoming and unwelcoming space of life and death is to be understood as existential dis/ease, a liminal place of illness and healing that defies discrete binary oppositions and that questions the static objecthood of my sculpture. The use of scan technology to investigate the innards of my ‘little people’ in the unusual ‘studio-setting’ of the hospital allowed me to go beyond sculpture’s skin and reveal pale, ghostly body-scapes suggestive of matter that forever stays out of reach in the hazy shadow of the image.

The transparency of the pale white shadows revealed against the dark background of the scans suggested the presence of an aura—art’s difference—as proposed by Walter Benjamin in his ground-breaking 1935 essay The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. His Marxist analysis ‘locates’ an immaterial, transcendent quality to art in its creation that sets it apart from the mechanised, capitalist mode of production which turns all labour applied to the reconfiguration of matter into added monetary value. The capitalist corruption of the artistic object in the processes of mass production and consumption divests the work of art of the
difference/aura with which its unique locatedness once invested it in a specific time, place, and tradition.\textsuperscript{141} Benjamin’s notion of art’s aura is a useful step up in understanding the unquantifiable, im/material qualities of the body of/as art, which cannot be reduced to the universality of the work of art generated by mass-production. The aura takes us back to a politicised materialism that mediates ideological/discursive constraints on art’s incorporation into concrete instances of physical reality.

As a model of artistic incorporation, Benjamin’s model is antithetical in nature, relying on the Marxist juxtaposition of mind and matter and its dialectics, and ultimately it may not provide solutions that break through divisive binaries and renegotiate and defuse them. As we have seen, Perniola suggests a way out of this determinism with the ‘shadow’ of art, which is his claim for a third dimension, regime or liminal space of art which defies binary discreteness and blurs the borders between subject and object, maker and made, animate and inanimate and so on. On Perniola’s view, art’s difference is located in its evasive shadow, which he defines as a remainder of the unique process of its making. The shadow adds on to what it pursues without making it better or worse; it is non-hierarchical, operates beyond binary oppositions, and feeds on situatedness, performance, and process rather being the result of an immanent ontology that would inform the creation of the work of art. The shadow, excess or remainder are super-discursive: they represent ‘the idea that there is in art as in philosophy something which is irreducible to the processes of normalization and standardization at work in society’\textsuperscript{142} and as such, the shadow also symbolises the uncanny, the ghostly and the im/material, an ambiguous area of incorporation and signification. Perniola’s proposal of art’s shadow chimes in with the work of contemporary artists who deal with postmodern issues of agency, performance, fragmentation, and embodiment through the incorporation of scan technology. Marilene Oliver’s dystopian, digital deconstruction of the posthuman body, Cooper’s digital de- and re-assembling of the body, and Mona Hatoum’s questioning of the porosity of the inside and outside of the body by way of the gendered gaze all dwell on the grey, shadowy areas where art’s signification is unpacked and renegotiated. As I wrote in Chapter 2:

\textsuperscript{141} Benjamin (1935) 2008: 23. 
\textsuperscript{142} Perniola 2004a: 65.
Through the persistence of the shadow as an aesthetic effect, of difference as performative shadow rather than immanent aura, once again we enter and blur the marginal, extreme edges of existence bordering on dissolution and death—of Self/Other, of artist vs art. To what extent is art a hospitable space, a friendly or ‘fiendly’ realm where artists may find their niche?

This question I started formulating an answer for in a series of interdisciplinary collaborations in virtual reality as described and analysed in Chapter 3. With the exception of The Weight of Rain (2011, figure 33), my subsequent interdisciplinary collaborations over the past decade have generally involved video work, which has questioned my physical implication in the process of making and broken through the barriers of the animate/inanimate, subject/object, material/immaterial, virtual/real, and artist/art in various ways.143 My video shorts within the No Glaze No Glory collaborative framework with filmmaker Raimond de Weerdt and others have insistently played on a postmodern deconstruction of binary oppositions. As its title anticipates, L’Interrupción (2011) self-consciously vaunts a black-and-white film-noir aesthetic that highlights the power of the shadow in the definition of fear and defamiliarisation. The recurrent ringing of an old Bakelite phone interrupts the artist’s work in her studio and creates a haunting sense of stalking. The fact that I perform the artist myself but not as myself, the protagonist who is (not) Fiona, adds to the uncanniness of the imagery, which questions the representativeness of the virtual. The build-up of anxiety and tension only ends in the final shots, when the artist angrily throws the phone back on the hook and refuses to play the unidentified caller’s game. La Obra Perfecta (2013) is a contemporary take on an emblematic 1960s dystopia, The Perfect Human by the Danish filmmaker Jørgen Leth; showing the imperfect perfection of life in an affluent post-industrial Western society, it suggests happiness but in fact, delivers the opposite. The Perfect Work of Art investigates the bodily relationship between a sculpture and its sculptor from bare clay to the naked image. The footage traces her bodily involvement with clay matter in the process of making and eventually suggests the artist’s merger with her piece of art through their dark shadows; in fact, the artist does not stand apart from the work of art but is assimilated

143 One could argue, though, that The Weight of Rain produces the virtual reality of the word, representative of the world but never its tangible matter.
into the perfection of the image she created. Her performance blurs the limits between the virtual and real, the material and immaterial, and the subject and object. _L’Interrupción, The Perfect Human_, and _La Obra Perfecta_ are all shot in black and white, but find their strength in the uncanny, grey interstitial area where final, essentialist meaning is questioned.

The interdisciplinary collaborations with André Martus, Kellie O’Dempsey, and Grayson Cooke share an investigation of the artist’s and art piece’s body, attempting their penetration and dissection in different ways. Martus’s and my replica of an RMI scanning devise for the Watershed exhibition (2014) not only displays the bare ceramic figure ready for dissection but also incorporates screened footage of the gaze penetrating the body of art as well as O’Dempsey’s performance drawing onto my own body holding one of my ‘little people’, so blurring their mutual limits. Cooke’s laser-beam tracing of my body and sculpture (2015) equally questions bodily limits and discretion between artist and art, incorporating simultaneously in the act of the gaze.

**Making Matter Waver: Uncanny Embodiment in/as Art**

The watershed moment of the Lismore floods in April 2017 marked my way into novel ways of making, as it brought the realisation that matter is as much an agent in the incorporation of art as the involvement of the artist’s body and effort themselves. The dissolving, deconstructive, and reconstructive power of an inanimate non-human agent such as water taught me to go with the flow and engage with materiality anew. The result is to a large extent a repurposing of material affected by the impact of the floodwaters as well as the coming into being of a new body of art, an œuvre in the making that exists in the tension and conversation of the body in, as and of art. The installation work for my upcoming PhD show means to illustrate the latter shift as well as recapturing previous moments of making.

The first installation discussed in Chapter 4, _Silent Partners_, revisits the video _La Obra Perfecta_ and reinserts its footage in a three-dimensional space by placing its ceramic protagonist, _The Uncanny Poet_, near the screen, thus blurring the inside/outside binary. _The Uncanny Poet_ also interacts with the audience through shadow play and challenges the spectator by returning the
gaze. The second, *Slip and Spill*, is a visual comment on my own bodily engagement with the destructive power of water and stages a bathtub as the vessel where clay slip is given manual shape but also loses form by spilling over its edges, thus offering a material representation of uncanny liminality. The third, *Spinal Imprints* (2017, figure 39), is a direct comment on Barad’s quantum physics notion of matter as a phenomenon, an event, which goes right against the common practice to see matter as an object, as an organic whole fixed in time and place. Rather, matter performs in the process of making, and so art exists in a relational ontology with the body beyond the separation of word and thing, cause and effect, subject and object, maker and made. In feeling clay matter flesh out along the hazy imprint of a spine, a sense of my own embodiment was restored as I constituted this piece. The fourth, *Body Boundaries*, revisits my collaboration with Grayson Cooke by juxtaposing the video footage on two screens, which enter in dialogue. The objective is to blur the boundaries between the body of the artist and the body of art and reversing the fragmenting power of the gaze, and returning the agency to both bodies as matter in flux. The fifth, *The Survivors* (2018, figures 1 & 41), is a homage to those ‘little people’ that survived the flood unscathed and continued to exist in the postdiluvian state of destruction of my studio. However, this installation also recovers the uncanny in its additional references to Freud’s large figurine collection and the sculpted objects in Alain Resnais famous short film *Even Sculptures Die*, which defy the onlooker’s gaze and appear imbued with proper life. The sixth, *Un/comfortable Partners*, was conceived as a performance piece at a themed exhibition that accompanied a conference in Barcelona this year on nationalism, populism, migration and refugees, and meant to question homelessness and belonging in the micro-cosmos of academia, thus enabling an interrogation of hospitality. The last, *Many Others*, is another, uncanny outcome of the previous performance piece and plays with viewing distance and so with standpoint and altering perception. The presumed unity of the large image falls slowly apart as one zooms in and comes closer, and what seems first an animated string-like shape disintegrates into what seems an underlying protocol for a digital image, which ultimately reverts to the isolated shots of bodily contortions performed in front of the camera. What the eye registers is an optical illusion, although one that rests on and is informed by material realities.
Concluding Remarks

This exegesis has been chronologically structured in its aim to attest to my development rather than my present position as an artist, as I firmly believe that we always take our past into the present and future, and never create in isolation but are conditioned by artistic tradition and personal experience while looking for new form and content. Thus, my thesis has brought in theory as I have retraced my trajectory over the last two decades, which has become increasingly interdisciplinary and collaborative with other media and been moving away from ceramic sculpture proper into video, new media, performance and installation work. In doing so, I have expanded my theoretical grounding from the defamiliarization of the uncanny (Freud, Žižek, Cixous, Kokoli) into the conceptually related areas of hospitality (Derrida), the aura (Benjamin) and the shadow (Perniola), to finally end up in a new materialist phenomenological non/position (Barad, Jones) that questions (artistic) embodiment as essentialist, static, opaque and solid, and conceives of the artist’s body and body of art as an ever-shifting performative joint configuration in the intra-play of energy and matter. The uncanny embodiment of the artist in/as art in the intra-active performance of making is what questions the discrete borders of the divisive binaries that discursively rule our realities and so makes materiality waver, that is, open to reconfiguration.

In this process, collaboration has become the interstitial area of change and transformation where our fear of, and exposure to the new and unfamiliar turns into a productive space of becoming. Collaboration with other art disciplines has challenged my own process of making and done away with preconceived ways of creating. I have come to trust clay as another subject and participant in the creative process rather than passive, dead matter to be moulded into shape and animated by my individual bodily and mental involvement. Creation has become a process of what Karen Barad coined ‘intra-play’ with other makers, means and materials that contribute to, and steer a project forward in unforeseen and unpredictable ways with engaged, embodied participations. There is no single point of departure nor single point of arrival, but these happen fortuitously in an informed process and negotiation of making, where the result becomes more than the sum of the individual parts.
A good example of the latter is the process of making behind the _La Obra Perfecta_ installation as displayed at the PhD art show. The mere title draws attention to itself linguistically by apparently singling out the work of art as a stable, solid end product forged from a rational beginning to a reasoned end. Yet, the whole creation of the video was based on a series of mutually enabling choices and actions between the different participants in this collaboration which occurred in intra-play and pushed the narrative ahead in reciprocal ways, as described in chapter 3. The video as ‘the perfect work of art’ took shape beyond the art piece featured in the footage, _The Uncanny Poet_, and it highlighted the intra-play between the sculptor’s and artwork’s bodies within and without its projection, as could be perceived in the strategic placing of the sculpture in contemplation of the screen and the shifting bodily presence of the sculptress—myself—in the three-dimensional exhibition space.

If we mean to move beyond individual constituents and constraints in the artistic process we should adopt new terminologies such as “to intra-act” and approach art as a performative and performed “phenomenon” or event as postulated by Karen Barad in her new-materialist interpretation of matter as agentive and sentient in the constitutive dialogue involving artist and art. This sharing of roles would help to deconstruct and subvert the discrete and hierarchising binaries that inform the Enlightened man-centred view of our universe and grants humans an agency that belies our organic placement and integration within our (creative) habitats. There is much to say for clay as “live matter” as Heather Cassil’s engagement with the medium shows (see chapter 4), and in fact in doing so she follows an old tradition that sees clay as equivalent to human flesh (Genesis 2:7: God makes man out of the earth’s dust; classical myth: Prometheus creates man out of clay). It tells us about the endurance of an old craft that may continue to prosper in the intra-play with other and newer art media and forms, providing us with a new vantage point from which to explore ceramic process and production beyond our reading of ceramics history, and so make us establish a more intimate and balanced relationship with both materiality and contextual identity.


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Appendices

Prompts


1) Searching - looking or groping for an object:
In unlikely loop your body you coil
You wrench matter wildly from empty air
The greedier you grope and the tougher you toil
You cannot grab what you now at stare

2) Selecting - fixing one’s vision or reaching:
You stand stiff in front of diverse display
Your head heads sideways on the cue of your sight
Slowly you sweep a half-circle’s sway
Eyes select what soul wants at all its mad might

3) Grasping - taking hold of an object:
Fulfilling your choice you chuck yourself fore
Your body boosts feline to fetch its prized prey
You break open my chest and catch its beating core
I surrender my heart to your hunkering sway

4) Transporting empty - walking unladen:
You straighten your head and stroke your heavy hair
Place my soul’s essence on top on a platter
You stroll straightforward with African flair
Minds and moods bound on bodily matter

5) Transporting loaded - moving an object from one place to another:
But you bend under the weight of a body not akin
Mass-morphed into freight in your effortful pull
You must move it from self-centre to margin
The past exacts its price for existence to be full

6) Holding - keeping a tool in one’s hand:
Imagine meanwhile you hold my tool in your hand
And cling to me close and I handle you with care
My member turns into an awaited magic wand
To unlock the tides of love as an amorous pair

7) Releasing load - dropping an object:
The foreign body that builds on fiendish past
Has now reached the rim of your self’s known space
Offload the weight that would oppress you so fast
And unfold from underneath to flex into place

8) Positioning - placing an object in its proper place:
You wander to and fro with right hand stretched out
Left hand hides your gem from spectacle and sight
Looking for an altar, a niche on your walk-about
To put it in a place that’ll end your plight

9) Pre-positioning (similar to positioning except that it means placing an object in temporary storage but ready to use in the next operation):
You kneel on the ground to come near and nigh best
Your deep breath now dwells on your relic’s lot
To prepare a precious niche as a proper nest
To put your trophy, tucked in a provisional spot

10) Inspecting - examining a finished product:
You lift up the altar and look at its angles
Ensuring each corner and seam coincide
Topple and turn it to forestall any fangles
Nothing your gem to hinder, no jewel to hide

11) Assembling - fixing one thing to another:
You carefully open your relic’s tight trove
And take your treasure from its cold tray
Place it in the exact centre of precious love
Where our souls could connect every which way

12) Disassembling – taking things apart:
You crawl back to the borders of your soul’s space
A knot of solitary feeling now fighting the foreign
You stretch into the dark but dare not further face
The unknown unnerving, a place of much pain

13) Using - operating a tool or control:
So you cross your arms in front of your chest
Shaping a talisman out of Christian lore
To ward off specters north, south, east or west
From any corner may come to frighten your core

14) Unavoidable waiting – a delay caused by shortage of material:
You keep your arms crossed and enact your awe
Each way the wind hurries a danger does hide
You stay stuck to the eerie on the edge of rough and raw
You wait for inspiration but in no-woman’s land bide

15) Avoidable waiting – voluntary interruptions for irrelevant reasons:
You can’t see why solutions are not yet to come
You roll to the rear and forth in fierce resistance
The sacred secret circle around your heart’s home
Should dissolve and diminish our distance

16) Planning – working out the next sequence of action:
So you attach yourself to the altar inside your known sphere
Cuddle its core with your body around bound
Soak up its heat to house your heart now and here
Pondering what path out is most sensible and sound

17) Resting – deliberate or involuntary pauses to recovery from fatigue:
While your thoughts relax from the thrust of life’s rage
You stretch out your legs and lie on your back
Your body unwinds and winds settle at this stage
Have you discovered what your karma does lack?

—Maarten Renes

The Perfect Human
After Jørgen Leth’s short Det Perfekte Menneske (1967)

I. Det Perfekte Menneske: Departure
The vision is vexed, in black and white anodyne
Time and space boundless, no limit to perfection
The screen shows two in steady grey routine

144 © Maarten Renes 2013. Reproduced with author’s permission.
A universal language in English intersection

The precious pair consumes the poor motions of life
Yet love remains without due emotion and motion
No sighs of pleasure, the stifling peace of still-life
Perfection the powerful limit to humane interaction

Needs reduced to a day’s meal and night’s rest
The mechanics of society a numbing matrix
To touch, share and couple a wish not confessed
Futile the feigned bliss in fake yin-and-yang mix

Words of resignation to finish the reel:
Nothing’s right or real, nothing remains to feel…

Barcelona, 18 February 2013

II. Det Perfekte Menneske: Again
Clutter my cold cage, uncover empty perfection
All tidy and tight order shan’t bring me you back
Dare me to go against love’s defection
Chuck your chattels into the core of my shack

The warm traces you left in my tiny wintry loft
Remain unfaded, infatuate my few rooms
Your caring love call still lures me so soft
I linger where tender touch intangibly looms

My heart’s incompleteness cannot heal into whole
And my lonely lair lacks any merit to mention
The ‘perfect’ human lives in a self-sufficient hole
So please let love make for happy imperfection
The more I muse on the merits of my Muse
The more I miss a love that never lets me loose
   Barcelona, 18 February 2013

III. Det Perfekte Menneske: Art’s Mimesis
I can feel your frenzy as you cut form out of clay
You break down walls to wield sculpting wide space
A wealth of new parameters now comes into play
Statues stand firm and upward all face

Size has now derived into a different matter
Clay accumulates in towers of tall expression
Detail dares manifest and must feelings flatter
A mimetic universe of unique impression

I dance with Fi through her forest of dreams
A landscape of love formed by flexible fingers
Clay coalesced into sculptural streams
Interior as exterior now leisurely lingers

I perceive you mistress and master of your past
Moulding your future out of present feelings so fast
   Barcelona, 19 February 2013

IV. Det Perfekte Menneske: Pairing Off
We now find and hail verse two-hundred and fifty
Perfection in prime numbers in careful consonance
Words in love lyric to ward off turning shifty
Always to know each other adroit not askance
The perfect human partakes from imperfection
In solitary existence is only dark death
Romance and nesting are our natural reaction
In bonding our bodies we acquire one breath

We twist and twirl together in love’s mellow mood
We coil up from clay into firmer stance
Our insides turn outsides where isolation once stood
Our merger makes way to another world hence

My gaze scans your sculpture, great in love’s lure:
Our natures united in knowledge and nurture
                      Barcelona, 20 February 2013

V. Det Perfekte Menneske, Jove’s Joint
Last night you stripped naked in unscrupulous love
White wine had won my warm way to your heart
A joint had adjoined to this nectar of Jove
Their effect on emotion was amorous art

They loosened up the limits of screen contact
Did away with the filters that defamiliarise us
You seduced me straightforward yet timid your tact
Our orgasms were wonderful, a lovers’ Olympus

You laid back after love and beckoned sweet rest
And stared at me relaxed with radiant eye
Our pleasure confessed and consumed our best
Believe me I cannot into better partner buy

But the truth is that you most me may touch
Each time you tell me you love me so much
   Barcelona, 20 February 2013

VI(a). Det Perfekte Menneske, The Act of Creation
Imagine a sculpture of solid, nude nature
Born in longing and finished by love faster
Now nourished by our mutual nurture
The perfect human in poem and plaster

Conceive in the flesh of this figure of art
How it may be merry, enthuse and thrive
How it could combine our merits unmarred
Our cult of clay and lyric come alive

Perhaps the supreme act of creative production
Is imbibing a body with our mind and soul
Our intense coupling covets reproduction
Our halves become as one, who knows a new whole?

While love is our lead to instil life in still matter
Sculpt, word or sow, would you like most the latter?
   Barcelona, 21 February 2013

VII(b). Det Perfekte Menneske: The Act of Creation (b)
Imagine a sculpture of solid, nude nature
Born in longing and finished by love faster
Now nourished by our mutual nurture
The perfect human in poem and plaster

Conceive in the flesh of this figure of art
How it may be merry, enthuse and thrive
How it could combine our merits unmarred
Our cult of clay and lyric come alive

Perhaps the supreme act of creative production
Is imbibing a body with our mind and soul
Our intense coupling covets reproduction
Our halves become as one, who knows a new whole?

While love is our lead to instil life in still matter
Sculpt, word or sow, would it much matter?

   Barcelona, 21 February 2013

VIII. Det Perfekte Menneske: In Search of You
I woke up to your warmth and nudeness tonight
Wanting my sex and soul to share
It was sheer imagination at its peak height
Our human perfection was not here nor there

Technology does much our moods to assuage
But cannot substitute tender touch
Our love needs expression at each new stage
To listen to soul and body more and much

Paradox appears as a path to perfection
Distance the den of our deeply sensed love
Our souls connect to common satisfaction
But our bodies can’t become one as behove

Whenever impassioned you need me
I wish I could proffer more than mere poetry

   Barcelona, 22 February 2013
IX. Det Perfekte Menneske: Your Words
You let me know you miss me a lot
Especially tonight, the weather writhing
Roads cut off everywhere, nowhere a dry spot
Rivers are swelling, fields are flooding

Ballina has roof tops at all force blown off
Gales reach great speed, stormy winds rage
You in your cot, well covered, however enough?
Wanting to hold me, with cuddling engage

Sweet, I wish I could be your cushion and sheet
Your mattress, bed and cover to boot
Wrap all my fabric your frame around neat
Never to leave you as my naked love’s loot

While the weather may raise protest as it will
Our climes remain impassioned, in pay to love’s bill
	Barcelona, 23 February 2013

X. Det Perfekte Menneske: Our Eye, Our I
The Skype screen becomes a wide whirlpool
I lose myself as I look in your bright eyes
Their round spheres in soft serenity rule
Your soul to their surfaces rapid to rise

I hold my breath and hail my bliss
Words not needed, to watch is enough
Lost in long love, there is nothing amiss
My daydreams I with the sweetest feeling stuff
We break through the mood of this brief magic spell
And resume responding with verbal verve
Yet the tenderness yielded we can still tell
It has touched upon our nudest nerve

We cherish those points of repose in our chat
They remind us love can’t all in words be clad

Barcelona, 23 February 2013

XI. Det Perfekte Menneske: Our Prayer
You seem more centred than I’ve ever you seen
You’ve taken grip on, and touch the ground
Your feet planted firmly, curious and keen
To engage and enjoy what we have found

You long for love and the care I can give
You appreciate an attention new and unknown
Let me reveal I feel more ready to live
I have in your love a more mature man grown

We miss and want us with mutual wish
Obliged to share across broad oceans and seas
Both pursue bliss without love-pain’s blemish
And long for answers to our amorous pleas

Our prayers are the price for perfection to pay:
We simply need to dwell in the same night and day

Barcelona, 24 February 2013

XII. Det Perfekte Menneske: Half Circle
Fi, I wish our circle would finally come round
Wide-ranging as the whole world can seem
We have ourselves only halfway found
We are further away than common esteem

If life lines on paper appear straight drawn
They sure end up lost in love’s vanishing point
Or they can bend to bind in converging bright crown
That circles and gels souls to be joint

All Earth-anchored feels flattened and plain
So excess of distance we must exclusive deem
Yet flight perspective reveals round our flat plane
So we must meet if we to separate seem

I bet on my luck between Barça and Brissie
Somewhere along the line I’ll meet my Missy
Barcelona, 24 February 2013

XIII. Det Perfekte Menneske: Full Circle
The vision’s been bleak in black, grey and white
But colours now to be added in hue and nuance
As love permeates life’s fabric without fright
No limits imposed by imperfection’s imbalance

Man and woman may again sit as one
Separation no more, they slot into pair
On bliss lies no longer a lost love’s ban
Feelings may now flower anew and fair

Their grey Eden acquires a colourful appeal
As black and white binaries unpack so well
And quell the question how close they can feel
If failing fixed roles rend Renes from Fell

Perfection’s no essence but performance of ID
A precious continuum kindled in love’s liberty

Barcelona, 25 February 2013

IVX. Det Perfekte Menneske: The Creation
The bleak screen fills with colours, bright, firm and kind
Their intensity instilled by emotions’ impact
We reach across raging skies into our mind
We touch each other’s souls with mutual tact

Our fingers advance and feel through the screen
The webcam gives way now to our greater need
Our fingertips touch as in the Chapel Sistine
Through physical contact love feelings fast feed

Could Michelangelo make this a sweeter scene
Discoloured and defective and ill-defined?
But to us it’s simply the best we have seen
Love the precious palette of our longing refined

We imbue black and white with our hottest hearts’ hue
Watch how the perfect human we in colours construe

Barcelona, 25 February 2013

XV. Det Perfekte Menneske: Entangled
We’re tight together, your breasts against my back
One hand reaches forward and feels my firm rod
The other dwells high, my hairy chest to deck
You nudge your head backward in enjoyment and nod

I turn my trunk and touch the nape of your neck
Arms arching round I embrace your rear
I squeeze your buttocks while tracing their smooth track
We know with each pull we press nigh and near

Our legs stand on the floor so firm and so solid
You tiptoe in search of sweet and soft touch
I lower my knees to nest in love avid
Together we meld tighter than imagined much

Fi, it takes two to fuse feeling and flesh
I don’t wish with anyone else to enmesh

Barcelona, 25 February 2013

XVI. Det Perfekte Menneske: Little Death
After dying little death, our bid for love’s best
You roll back and rest from our rant and rave
My hands choose your head, held on my chest
You repose and relax on your nude nimble knave

Pleasure has peace and intimacy instilled
Your breathing becomes deeper and softly slows down
Your eyes ease into mine, the effort fulfilled
Like monarchs enthroned, love is us to crown

In your arms’ embrace I bare my whole being
Brought to bliss by the sweetness of sex
We sigh in surrender, and still are seeing
The way you would wet while I would wax
Is this then the height of human perfection:
To die love’s death for life’s resurrection?

Barcelona, 26 February 2013

XVII. Det Perfekte Menneske: Untimely Zones
We’re both tied up in our teaching activity
And find no time to catch up and connect
The screen at dusk and dawn confers sensitivity
But lately our toggles let us down and defect

How am I to act? I need you in my homestead!
Wake you each while and uproot your night’s rest?
Become a ghost gone crazy whenever you go to bed?
Scare you out of sleep and stir your still nest?

Or should I stay awake and shatter my sleep?
Contact you some time convenient and safe?
Risk your rejection with the looks of a creep?
Will you still love me when I look like sleep’s slave?

We slot into time in antagonistic, odd way
I wish it won’t too long last, nor similar stay

Barcelona, 27 February 2013

XVIII. Det Perfekte Menneske: Entwined
I recall that bright day at Ballina beach
The sun shone its rays on our shoulder
Radiant smiles led the world within reach
Last night’s love still to linger and smoulder

We walked our way past the wide water inlet
And in front of the surf we hit the hard sand  
Trailing new tracks, we old footprints offset  
Tree trunks once washed-up lay wild on flat land  

The coast-scape became a setting of sculptures  
Bodies strewn together, tightly sealed and bound  
A metaphor of us meandering, entwined in adventures  
Enjoying the firm emotions finally found  

I’d simply flow the oceans and seas across  
For the current to fetch us and together us toss  
   Barcelona, 28 February 2013  

—Maarten Renes\footnote{© Maarten Renes 2013. Reproduced with author’s permission.}
La Obra Perfecta

Fíjate en la obra perfecta (opening)
Fíjate en el cuerpo y su sombra
Y observa la artista perfecta
Su búsqueda
Como nos mira
Como nos analiza
Observa que la tiene delante
Pero sus ojos no la ven

La obra perfecta es elusiva (stool)
Se busca pero no se encuentra
Se desea pero no se materializa
Se deshace en cuanto se hace
Se intenta pero no se fragua
La obra perfecta se aproxima, pero no se alcanza

Nota otra vez la artista (walk round)
Nota como se acerca
Nota otra que no hay obra
Nota como se aleja
Aprecia otra vez la artista
Aprecia como su volumen se sugiere sobre la pared
Aprecia como su cuerpo salta de la sombra que echa
Ahora aprecia como desaparece en la sombra

La artista lucha con su obra (tools)
Nota las armas en su mano
Nota como la corta:
Horizontalmente
Otra y otra vez
Nota como la golpea:
Lateralmente
Otra y otra vez
Nota como la corta:
Verticalmente
Otra y otra y otra vez
Nota como la piensa aplastar
Nota como la piensa peinar
Nota como la piensa rascar
Nota como la piensa pinchar
Otra y otra vez
La obra lucha contra la artista

La artista es la sombra de la obra (stooping walk)
Fíjate como arrastra su peso
Fíjate como arrastra su edad
Fíjate como arrastra su esfuerzo
Fíjate como arrastra su búsqueda
Ahora la sombra es el artista de la obra

La obra descansa en el suelo (the fall)
Atrapa a la artista -- Ya yace en el suelo

La obra perfecta se erige (circling the sculpture)
Ahora ella se erige detrás
Ahora ella se erige delante
Sombra y luz se funden

Ve como la artista se gira hacia la obra
Ve como la artista se gira hacia la sombra
Ve como ella elije el todo de la nada
Ve como la sombra la absorbe
Ve como la sombra la asimila
Ahora ve como la obra perfecta permanece
Sin tocar, sin mover, sin pestañar

Sola…

The Perfect Work of Art
Look at the perfect work of art
Look at its body and its shadow
Observe the perfect artist
Observe her search
How she stares at us
How she analyses us
Observe she has it before her
But her eyes don’t see

The perfect work is elusive
One searches, but does not find it
One wishes, but it does not materialise
It undoes itself as soon as made
One tries but it does not take shape
The perfect work allows proximity, not arrival

Note the artist again
Note how she comes close
Note the work again
Now note how it takes distance
Watch the artist again
Watch her volume suggested on the wall
Watch how her body emerges from its shadow
Now watch how it disappears into the shadow

The artist battles with her work
Note the weapons in her hand
Note how she cuts:
Horizontally
Again and again
Note how she beats:
Laterally
Again and again
Note how she cuts:
Vertically
Again and again, and again
Note how she considers pounding it
Note how she considers brushing it
Note how she considers scratching it
Note she considers stabbing it
Again and again, and again
The work fights the artist

The artist is the shadow to her work
Look how she bears its weight
Look how she bears their age
Look how she bears her effort
Look how she bears her search
Now the shadow is the artist of the work

The work lies on the floor
It traps the artist --Now she lies on the floor
The perfect work stands
Now she moves behind
Now she moves in front
Now shadow and light merge

See how the artist turns to her work
See how she turns to its shadow
See how she chooses all or nothing
See how the shadow sucks her in
See how the shadow assimilates her
Now see how the perfect work remains
Without touch, without movement, without a blink

Alone

—Maarten Renes$^{146}$

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