Multimedia item accompanies print copy
This paper is dedicated to my family:

Lizzie, Edwin and Nella

and friends:

Tim, Elisa, Jen, Jennifer, Andrew and Clar.

I would also liked to acknowledge the assistance of:

P Charuk

and

J Hinterding
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this paper is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.
ABSTRACT

Fur, Pixels, Loved Ones and Other Transients is a paper discussing my practice from 2000 to 2003. It is a personal and theoretical exploration of common concepts and theories in reference to my works Fluff Snuffs (2000), Relentless (2001), Trigger Displacement (2002), Bathing in A Warm Glow of Nothing (2003) and Memory Play Back (2003). The effects of Tele-visual and computer mediated images of death and violence within these works are investigated, which lead to an exploration of fear and trauma. This mechanism of mediation is used within the works as a means of exploring the subtleties within the screen-based image that may go unnoticed or seem disconcerting. The role of the soft toy is an important element in these works and this is further explored by referencing the use of the soft toy in works of several other contemporary artists. These works are discussed to further explore the complexity of ideas on death, violence, trauma, memory and fear.
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INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper Fur, Pixels, Loved Ones and Other Transients makes reference to the idea of there being something temporal that might pass over these works. These transients and the emotions they can evoke can be thought of as a haze through which to read the paper or view the works. This paper is an attempt to make these transients constant and dense in an effort to examine their effect.

My art practice is based on personal experience and opinion, which comes from research and findings as well as my own perceptions of life in general. I have experienced traumatic events at a young age and this has affected the content of my works. This trauma isn't the sole concern of my art practice and opinions, but it is a contributing factor that the works' content can be traced back to.

This paper is a discussion of the five works that I have produced over the period 2000 to 2003. I start my discussion with a look at Fluff Snuffs (2000) and Relentless (2001), which were produced at an undergraduate level. I follow this with a look at an intermediate work, Trigger Displacement (2002) and finally the concepts and effects of my two current works Bathing in A Warm Glow of Nothing (2003) and Memory Play Back (2003).

I trace the works' progression beyond the context of art into social and theoretical realms in order to gain greater insight into art and my own interests and my working process. This allows me to explore the similarities and differences between the works, both technically and conceptually in order to determine how they function as separate art works.

Chapter One gives a brief description of the video installations Fluff Snuffs and Relentless. Chapter Two takes a look at these two works and their use of
the computer, Tele-visual mediation\(^1\), the animated form, violent content and
the referencing of entertainment. This is explored through media theory, social
theory, psychoanalysis and the comparison of these works to contemporary
forms of entertainment. Audience response to disturbing content and the
artist's responsibility in the generation and exploration of elements with such
content are addressed in Chapter Three. The psychoanalytical, psychological
and sociological research into the debate about representations of violence
and death on television provides another reference point in this paper.

Chapter Four aims to explore what Fluff Snuffs and Relentless might be
communicating about death and violence. Not only in the representations of
death and violence amongst mediated formats, but also in their abstraction.
This is examined through a comparison of these works with other
contemporary artist's works and through the exploration of technical
definitions of the two terms 'death' and 'violence'.

Through a discussion of the video work Trigger Displacement, Chapter Five
marks the progression from earlier works to later works, showing a more
informed development of ideas and concerns. Here death and violence
transform into fear and paranoia and this is discussed through
psychoanalytical research, contemporary issues and media theory. Trigger
Displacement incorporates television noise as a sourced visual component,
which is manipulated within the work. This use of noise is significant as it
provides a platform for the development of a kind of screen psychosis, which
then links into the more recent works Bathing in A Warm Glow of Nothing and
Memory Play Back.

Chapter Six incorporates an investigation into the interactive DVD installation
Bathing in A Warm Glow of Nothing. Through media theory and electronic arts
theory, this chapter aims to highlight the works commentary on the positive

\(^1\) In the discussion of mediated imagery I am using the term mediated as relating to a medium, and a
medium being "any instrument of communication; it carries or 'mediates' the message". Therefore
when I refer to Tele-visual or computer mediated imagery, I am referring to imagery that has passed
through or has been carried by the medium of television or computers. Inglis, F. Media Theory: An
Introduction (p.21) Blackwell Publishers Oxford, United Kingdom (1990)
and negative effects of television viewing. The use of interactivity is discussed by examining the writing of contemporary electronic arts theorists.

The interactive video installation *Memory Play Back* is the final work addressed within this paper in Chapter Seven. This chapter discusses the work in the context of and comparison to other contemporary artists who have used the imagery of a rabbit or ‘bunny’ within their works. A general exploration of the ideas behind repressed memories and their recollection through the action of play are the main conceptual concerns of *Memory Play Back*. This chapter briefly touches on the moving image as an ephemeral experience, one of recording, remembering and forgetting.

I conclude with a summation of the overall effect of the five works as a coherent body of work that reveals a progression from fur to pixel and the hidden to the revealed.

I like to think of my works as moving sculptural photography, comprised primarily of animation, layering and compositing to create digital video installations. The sourced footage and still imagery used comes from scanning 3d objects, digital photography and computer generated images. I have found my video works to be similar to sculpture more so in my recent pursuit of 3D generated imagery. With 3D modelling I am manipulating and sculpting objects within a 3D environment, and although I am using the click of a mouse instead of the texture of my fingers it is mentally the same 3D space that I would sculpt in if I were in a clay studio. My most recent works have incorporated the sculptural and computer assisted formats discussed above with the addition of interactivity.

*Fluff Snuffs* and *Relentless* were first exhibited at the University of Western Sydney as graduating works, and both incorporated the use of multiple televisions. They contain references to violence, death, trauma, mortality, childhood, personification, entertainment, amusement and all of these occur through Tele-visual and computer mediated imagery.

*Fluff Snuffs* is a video and sound installation displayed on four monitors that documents several dozen blood-packed teddy bears being run over by a car. The action of violence within the work is depicted within a continuous loop and the monitors consecutively display the action in slow motion, in reverse, with accelerated speed and in real time. Incorporated within the piece is the distorted sound of one of the bears bursting open at the point of impact with the car tyre.

*Relentless* was also displayed as an installation on four monitors. The work is an animation of a domestic environment where each screen contains a single room. Assailant characters with doll limbs and soft toy bodies move from screen to screen, following each other and repeatedly shoot a victim.
character, within a continuous loop. Unlike other animated forms, such as cartoons, the victim character bleeds and sustains injuries. After being shot this character gets up and continues to move around the rooms, similar to the regenerative abilities of characters in violent video games. To concentrate the drama of each of the five acts of violence in *Relentless*, only the minimal sound of the gunshots are heard by the viewer.

*Fluff Snuffs* and *Relentless* are both in full colour and the violence is palpable, even though in *Relentless* the violence and harm that is inflicted is animated and in *Fluff Snuffs* the victim is obviously impervious and a toy. There is an element of humour associated with both works, as the events depicted within them are absurd and unrealistic. *Relentless* is also very slow moving; everything happens in a relaxed atmosphere, no room stands out more than another. The characters glide across the screen and moments of violently shocking acts are experienced and inflicted by expressionless indifferent characters.
Video Stills From *Fluff Snuffs* © 2000 Mel Donat

Video Still From *Relentless* © 2001 Mel Donat

When referring to Tele-visual or computer mediated imagery, within Fluff Snuffs and Relentless, I am referring to imagery that has passed through or has been carried by the medium of television or computers. The term mediated refers to the inflected form of the word mediate. When a medium mediates information, changes occur to the information that the medium carries. The medium acts as a mechanism and the information that is transmitted is changed so that it is communicated in a way that is understandable to the receiver of the information.

Francis Inglis suggests that a telephone is an example of 'a pure medium'; a communication device or medium that carries the sound of a person's voice across a distance without much change to the information or the sound of that voice. But he postulates that when discussing the way mediums work, one may be confronted with differing ideas as to what the mediums are actually doing to information and whether mediums can in fact carry information without changing or manipulating that information.

The telephone, the radio, the film, the television are all equivalently media along with print and the human voice, to say nothing of painting or sculpture. The trouble is of course, that when we begin analysis of how each works, they are not at all equivalent, and "mediation" begins to have a slippery feel as manipulation begins to find room to move.

This movement of mediation towards manipulation and how the imagery is effected by the process of being carried through the mechanisms of television

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2 "A medium is any instrument of communication; it carries or 'mediates' the message" Inglis, F. Media Theory: An Introduction (p.21) Blackwell Publishers Oxford, United Kingdom (1990)


5 Inglis, F. Media Theory: An Introduction (p.21) Blackwell Publishers Oxford, United Kingdom (1990)
and computers is integral to the works and forms a point of reference in this paper.

As Fluff Snuffs and Relentless are displayed on four television monitors the effect of television as an entertainment medium and its ability to mediate an image is discussed in the following paragraphs. Simon Penny speculates that when reading electronic art works the user or viewer tends to rely on previous encounters with everyday technology in order to gain some perspective on the unfamiliar forms that media arts can take.

Into this vacuum pour paradigms from other areas, most commonly those from electronic gaming arcades, from the desktop computers, from television, and from the art gallery.⁶

These forms of technology that are experienced in the everyday present the viewer with multiple forms of “entertainment”⁷. Relentless uses the critical realm of contemporary art to reference the modality of television, entertainment, the Tele-visual and being entertained. The works explore and exploit the mechanisms at play within entertainment and television through senseless repetition and the familiar experience of separation and acceptance called watching TV.

The Toys, Triggers and Television forum held in Melbourne Australia in 2000 by Gun Control Australia, concluded that the viewing of violence within the media of television could cause three effects in children, that being the ‘aggressor effect’, ‘bystander effect’ and ‘victim effect’⁸. These effects are said to be present in children, but children who have viewed a lot of violence become adults.

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⁷ “Entertainment: 1. the act or art of entertaining or state of being entertained. 2. an act, production, etc, that entertains; diversion; amuse.” Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus (p.374) Harper Collins Publishers, Glasgow (1993)
⁸ Toys, triggers & telecommunications: violence and youth in the 2000's (p.36) Gun Control Australia Melbourne 2000
Across the entire range of parties interested in the topic of TV violence including social scientists, doctors and public health officials, policy makers, parents, and even those in the television industry itself there is now a strong, indeed unshakeable consensus that long term exposure to TV violence contributes to three types of harmful effects:
1. learning of aggressive attitudes and behaviours;
2. desensitisation, or increased callousness, towards the victim of violence; and
3. exaggerated fear of becoming victimised by violence.\(^9\)

The ‘bystander effect’ as described here as a desensitisation towards the victim of violence, is what I am interested in when considering Relentless and Fluff Snuffs. This idea of a bystander effect within the viewing of Tele-visual mediated violence is different to that described later in regard to the viewing of real events of violence. But if a ‘bystander effect’, as it has been described here in relation to TV violence, was experienced when viewing these two works the works would become easier to enjoy. The inability to help the characters may cause the emotion of empathy in the viewer, as the viewer cannot help the character and cannot fully associate themselves with the event of being run over by a car or being shot in the head and getting up again. The viewer is not responsible for what happens to the characters within the works and this lack of responsibility and inability to help the characters can lead to a fuller enjoyment of the humorous element of the work.

The Tele-visual component of both works allows for a re-adjusting of the viewer’s thinking into that of being entertained and disassociated with what they are watching. This mechanism of diverting\(^10\) one’s attention associated with television, allows you to be amused\(^11\) and entertained by events that would be horrific if encountered in a different context. Violent acts within film, television or video are generally seen as entertaining when presented within a

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\(^{9}\) Toys, triggers & telecommunications: violence and youth in the 2000’s (p.36) Gun Control Australia Melbourne 2000

\(^{10}\) “Divert: 1. to turn aside; deflect. 2. to entertain; amuse. 3. to distract the attention of.”  Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus (p.328) Harper Collins Publishers, Glasgow (1993)
scripted narrative structure with character development and the associated cinematic traits such as soundtrack and lighting.

One of the reasons people choose to see violent movies is because they are entertaining. This does not mean consumers of violent movies find all violence entertaining, but the process of watching a film which is composed of acting, soundtrack, direction, dialogue, as well as representations of violence, is meant to be entertaining because violent movies are part of the entertainment industry and made widely available to the consumer."12

Relentless and Fluff Snuffs provide a critical counterpoint to these ideas, by colliding our experience of everyday technologies, such as television, with absurd and repetitious actions.

This repetition and absurdity make both works entertaining. There is no background given to the associations between the characters in Relentless and there is a non-moving camera angle whereby everything is viewed from the same side-on perspective and in Fluff Snuffs minimal close focusing; i.e. basic cinematography. Yet these works can be entertaining, because of their lack of reasoning and relentless pursuit of blood splattering.

There is a history of animation violence that can be traced to Warner Bros' cartoon characters such as the Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote, Elmer Fudd hunting Bugs Bunny and Chuck Jones' earlier cartoon, The Three Bears. These cartoons presented the same storyline and character development that allows for an adult enjoyment of animated imagery. A look at the work of Chuck Jones on the PBS website describes the joy in viewing cartoon violence as an appreciation of the misfortune of the character. The unfortunate character is usually the victim of their own demise and oblivious to the ongoing harm they are causing themselves.

12 Hill, A. Shocking Entertainment: Viewer Response to Violent Movies (p.107) published
In a THREE BEARS cartoon, angry Pa Bear punches his overgrown son Junyer in the mouth for interrupting his breakfast. Does Jones think that we think that this kind of brutality is funny? He has every right to, considering that scenes like this helped make him one of the world's most successful cartoon creators. If you've ever eagerly awaited your favorite character's next painful calamity, you know one of life's guilty pleasures. But rest assured, your sin is a mild one. Enjoying Junyer's misfortunes is basically forgivable, because while he's a hapless victim, he's also five times larger and stronger than his dad. Plus, he's about 50 times dumber (he is a baby, after all), so he's oblivious to the tragedy of his father's scorn. We wouldn't want it any other way, would we?\(^{13}\)

What happens to Wile E. is his own fault. He could catch another, less elusive quarry than the Road Runner for food, but the bird is what he wants. He could order supplies from someplace other than Acme, but his loyalty is blind. Wile E.'s single-mindedness is what makes his situation so funny and pathetic at the same time.\(^{14}\)

The single-mindedness and oblivious nature of the character's actions that lead to a harmful outcome for the character are what make the cartoons entertaining for the viewer. The inevitability of the character's misfortune and the predictability of the storyline are what make the violence within the cartoons palatable.

The violence within these cartoons are also made amusing by the use of colour and abstraction within the media of cartoon animation, as described here by Paul Bacon, a New York based freelance cartoonist and writer,

Most cartoons are made to tickle us, but their subject matter can be very dark and disturbing. Characters are often put through hideous manifestations: their bodies contorted, limbs severed, or their heads smashed between steel girders. How can viewers stomach such savagery? A great deal is owed to the abstract drawing style of comic animation, but it's also a matter of saving face.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{The coyote is always more humiliated than harmed by his failure.}\textsuperscript{16}

But it's not only the stylistic form of the comic animation that makes these cartoons amusing it's also the humiliation of the character rather than their physical harm, which is most amusing. \textit{Wile E. Coyote} doesn't give up to until the very end of the cartoon, allowing for many failures, but he still perseveres, sometimes maintaining battle scars from one botched attempt to another, sometimes not.

Unlike the characters in these cartoons the characters in \textit{Relentless} haven't established any real reason for their pursuit of the victim character and the victim character bleeds and breaks rather then bends or folds. Yet the decorative nature and colouring of the work make reference to the visual abstraction that occurred in these 1950s cartoons. These visual associations allow for these characteristics of entertainment to be read into the work. The work is therefore amusing and playful in its representation of violence through its use of animated imagery. \textit{Relentless} if viewed as a reference to absurd entertainment formats can allow the viewer to deal with the issues presented in a non-threatening or forced way.

Not only is there a reference to the abstract visuals within these cartoons, but there is also a connection to the idea of abstraction. The idea of abstraction allows for an object, person or group of people to be represented in a distorted way. The word 'distorted' is commonly used in psychology to


\textsuperscript{16} Jones. C from \textit{Chuck Amuck} as quoted by Paul Bacon
describe the abstracting of reality. The idea of the enemy as being 'Other' and different from the 'I' or 'Self' is constructed, and this enemy is then visually or ideologically abstracted, to allow the self to distance themselves from the enemy. Once the enemy is abstracted/distorted into the 'Other' it allows for a lack of sympathetic/empathetic emotion to be felt towards the enemy, especially towards the death or killing of the enemy or 'Other'.

_When your icon of the enemy is complete you will be able to kill without guilt, slaughter without shame._

_In all propaganda, the face of the enemy is designed to provide a focus for our hatred. He is the other. The outsider. The Alien. He is not human. If we can only kill him, we will be rid of all within and without ourselves that is evil._

This abstraction may be present when viewing Relentless or Fluff Snuffs, as a certain abstraction or distortion of reality occurs, whereby the characters you are seeing convey no emotion. They are perhaps presented as just objects that are involved in violent events, allowing for some of these ideas of abstraction and distancing to occur.

This abstraction of reality and the absurdity used within cartoons can be seen in more contemporary comic animation such as South Park and Quads, who take their origins from the early Warner Bros cartoons already discussed. These recent cartoons are directed more to an adult audience as they have an Office of Film and Literature Classification rating of MA (Mature Audience).

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17. My concerns lie elsewhere, with those forms of domination that center primarily around the construction of the other: forms that deny life by controlling its definition and its reality. The effect of these constructions, if not their conscious design, has been to rob the other of any genuine standing in the world, thereby permitting the dominant groups to operate more freely to achieve validation for themselves and ensure the maintenance of their privilege....Throughout most of recorded Western history...the primary constructors have been male, white, educated, and of the dominating social classes, while the object of their construction have been defined as all that the dominant group is not.” Sampson, E Celebrating The Other: A Dialogic Account of Human Nature (p.4) Westview press San Francisco (1993)

South Park and Quads would be more of a reference point for Relentless and Fluff Snuffs in that they are currently being aired on free to air television and were being aired during the exhibiting of these works.

Relentless has a visual similarity to South Park in its use of 2D images and 'cut and paste' type animation, therefore allowing for an association to be made with already established ways of viewing cartoon violence as entertainment. Fluff Snuffs and Relentless both in their political incorrectness towards representing innocent objects of play as objects that can be destroyed and not of sentimental value, allows for an association to be made to Quads and its political incorrectness to the sensitive issues of human disabilities. Therefore due to the already established entertainment concepts presented within this form of cartoon satire, viewers are able to look past any political incorrectness and view the work as commentary on whatever subject is presented.

Going against the grain of political correctness prevalent on network TV, the characters of South Park mercilessly attack every conceivable minority, ethnicity and religious group. At the start of every episode, a disclaimer ironically reads, “Due to the content of this show, it should not be viewed by anyone.”

Look around and you’ll find that there’s a new generation of cartoons that are setting the tone for a new round of striking social satire. From Fox’s The Simpsons to Comedy Central’s South Park and MTV’s Daria, the networks are producing an extraordinary range of animation that isn’t just designed to fill growing craniums with mindless junk. These cartoons represent some of the most engaging, witty and sometimes biting programming on television, tackling topics from teen angst to

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politics, consumerism and rednecks. Once again, cartoons aren't just kids' stuff any more.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{south_park.png}
\end{center}

Excerpt From \textit{South Park} © Trey Parker and Matt Stone

Presenting difficult content in an amusing form can also relate to ideas of using play in psychotherapy. Play and arts therapy are ways that children are taught to deal with traumatic events that they have experienced. The events are either played out again by the child or a visual expression of that trauma, such as a drawing, is created by the child as a way of exploring emotions associated with the trauma.

\textit{Play therapy and art therapy also can help younger children to remember the traumatic event safely and express their feelings about it.}\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{Relentless} also manages to make references to doll house set-ups with its cross sectioned/profile style visuals, as if all these weird happenings could be occurring in the fantasy world of toys, in some strange game they play for fun.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{22} Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters – National Institute of mental Health Fact Sheet. (p.5) National Institute of Health Publications USA 2001
\end{flushright}
The character's 2d style construction and movements also make references to the scrolling style landscaped video adventure games such as Mario Brothers, Sonic the Hedgehog and Wonder Boy, therefore making a connection to game play processes and their environment.

*Fluff Snuffs* uses the Tele-visual element as well as a strong audio component to express its entertaining nature. The sound of one of the teddy bears being run over gives off a high pitched squeal, as the air of its blood packed hidden balloon escapes. With the use of the viewer's imagination it can be thought that this noise could be the sort of squeal of pain that a teddy bear might produce when run over by a car, which adds an extra element of humour.

The audio component within *Relentless* is the minimal sound of a gunshot as the victim is being shot in different scenarios. This means that the majority of the work is silent and this adds an element of surprise. It enhances the impact of the imagery at that moment of shooting, therefore emulating the kind of suspense and climax associated with this kind of filmic spectacle. This creates an association to the mechanism of suspense and amusement within the work, whereby once the viewer has seen one act of violence occur they are waiting for the next act to occur.
CHAPTER THREE: Audience Response and Interpretation to *Relentless* and *Fluff Snuffs*.

Not all viewers of my work find it amusing but a general consensus of anecdotal viewer opinions has found the works to be mostly amusing and thought provoking. The work is aimed at adults who are generally assumed to have a sophisticated appreciation and understanding of mediated images of violence. But these works naturally attract the attention of children, due to the close relationship between animation, cartoons and games. Animation is often used to communicate complex ideas to children so it is conceivable that children will understand some of the conceptual aspects behind these works. Children can be very analytical about art works, they generally understand that they are representations that use symbolism to express thoughts or feelings.

As these works are art works for exhibition they are not subject to classification or censorship, but I do not believe they are for viewing by a young audience (children under the age of eight). It isn’t because the content could be harmful in any way as most children have seen much worse by the age of ten, in the form of movies, news and games. In this situation the responsibility ultimately falls on the parents of the child within the gallery space yet my experience is that most parents feel it is the responsibility of the artist to provide content warnings on such representations of violence. For example a comment in a visitor’s book described *Relentless* as disgusting and that I should have been ashamed of myself for presenting this work in a public space easily accessible to a younger audience. Obviously this person did not find the work amusing and was of course worried that the work would disturb her/his children.

So what happens when an audience member is not entertained by the work and does not find the work to be amusing or humorous? Is the laughter

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23 “By the time a child has finished primary school, he or she will have watched at least 8000 murders and 10 000 other acts of violence.” Weiten. W (1998) Psychology: Themes & Variations as quoted in
displayed by some viewers only a cover up for their discomfort with the work? If this is the case then the element of laughter could be seen as a defence mechanism used when one is uneasy with what they are viewing. Viewers aren't trapped into watching the work, they can walk away, but to laugh at the work due to discomfort is perhaps a way to use the element of humour to make the work comfortable to watch. The viewer laughs due to unease, but with laughter there can come a release from the tensions experienced with the viewing of the work.

There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh at. Laughter, whether conciliatory or terrible, always occurs when some fear passes. It indicates liberation either from physical danger or from the grip of logic.  

Laughter, as described here by Theodor Adorno a French philosopher, can be seen as a form of liberation from fear or discomfort, which might be what the viewer may experience when dealing with the disturbing content of these two works. If this is overcome the viewer can experience a critical look at the content of the work.

Looking at the works from a psychological perspective leads me to consider associations with the anthropomorphic qualities of the characters within Fluff Snuffs and Relentless. This phenomenon of personification is due to the characters human like behaviour and appearance within both works. Within Fluff Snuffs the teddy bears bleed like humans and the characters within Relentless have doll limbs that resemble human arms and legs while heads and torsos resemble animals. For me this type of personification is based on childhood experiences of play and role-playing. The use of soft-toys and childhood related mechanisms are an ongoing component within my work.

Wellisch, M Games Children Play: the Effects of Media Violence on Young Children (p.5) Australian Early Childhood Association Inc, Australia 2000


25 *the attribution of human characteristics to things* Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus p.850 Harper Collins Publishers, Glasgow 1993
This means that toy-like rabbits, dogs and bears continuously appear within my works. It seems that in dealing with my childhood experiences and exploring those memories through the works, I rely on these juvenile images and objects. Then with the added element of fantasy and make-believe the personification of the characters allows us to place ourselves in the scenario that the character is experiencing. This then allows the emotional responses that we would usually associate with a person to be placed on an inanimate object. The resulting associations could be used to further explore certain types of trauma.

I could have used images of real people within Relentless but I feel it is easier to sympathise with the object of a teddy bear, as I believe most people would have loved a teddy bear or two in their lives or something similar. It is also easier to disassociate yourself from the characters because they aren’t human and it’s not a snuff movie. In psychoanalytical terms the object of a soft toy is viewed to be an object outside of ourselves or ‘not me’, allowing for an easier disassociation for the viewer. In terms of childhood development, infants grow attached to soft toys, by associating them with comfort. Donald Winnicott, a psychoanalyst and researcher into child psychiatry, describes them as transitional objects.

*Also, out of all this (if we study any one infant) there may emerge some thing or some phenomenon – perhaps a bundle of wool or the corner of a blanket or eiderdown, or a word or tune, or a mannerism – that becomes vitally important to the infant for use at the time of going to sleep, and as a defence against anxiety, especially anxiety of depressive type. Perhaps some soft object or other type of object has been found and used by the infant, and this then becomes what I am calling a transitional object.*

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26 ‘the condition of being a child; the period of life before puberty’ Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus (p.187) Harper Collins Publishers, Glasgow 1993

27 ‘(Psychology) a powerful shock that may have lasting effects. 2. (Pathology) any bodily injury or wound’ Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus (p.1233) Harper Collins Publishers, Glasgow 1993

The object of the soft toy is used as a transitional object within the work, a way of easing the viewer into a state of engagement. This use of the visual and tactile nature of the soft toy as a kind of buffer is explored in greater detail in regard to Memory Play Back in Chapter 7 of this paper.

The use of ‘toy’ objects is also significant in the fact that the objects are objects of play. The characters could be just playing; it could all be make believe or fantasy. In the case of Relentless the character is never affected by the violent acts forced upon him, he gets up and he keeps on going, the game and play associations are made clearer in the characters regeneration of himself and the repetitive nature of the work.

Fluff Snuffs also occupies a space of make-believe or fantasy, exploring blood filled and bloody soft-toy objects. The viewer logically understands that teddy bears don’t bleed, yet makes the imaginative leaps. The work runs backwards on one of the monitors suggesting that the process can be reversed and the teddy bears can be made whole again. Therefore, the use of childhood objects makes the exploration of mortality and death more palatable, as death is presented in a playful way, reversible and lacking finality.

The regenerative ability of the victim character in Relentless is similar to those attributed to avatars in video games, this leads me to look at the work by American new-media artist Kathleen Ruiz.

Her installation piece called Bang, Bang (You’re Not Dead?) explores the concept of immortality and fantasy, within violent video games. The work combines large photographs of players in arcades with an interactive projection of a digital game. This is interrupted by the shadows of the gallery visitors, while the players are attempting to shoot at objects. Ruiz’s work comments on the inevitable and accidental interaction between reality and fantasy. This strategy for altering the awareness of the gamer in the immersive environment brings the multiple realities that the player is within to the foreground, as discussed by Curatorial Director at the Bellevue Museum, Brian Wallace;
The structure of the game suggests that the user’s freedom to understand space - to define space - by shooting at it is simultaneously total and meaningless. Images of users enmeshed, Laocoon-like, by the hardware of the immersive technologies underscore the extreme vulnerability of the gamer, a vulnerability inextricably related to the fantasies of violence and the invisibility of the medium catered to by the dominant conventions of immersive environments. Viewers moving freely through the installation interfere with the freedom of other viewers to see, and to shoot at, objects and images. Bang, Bang (you’re not dead?) compels the subject to come on out (“hands up!”) from behind the instrument of subjectivity - be it camera, gun, or Cartesian point of view - to be recognised.29

Bang, Bang (you’re not dead?) provokes important questions regarding the complicity of gamers in the eradication of distinctions between reality and fantasy – and between responsibility and irresponsibility.30

Ruiz questions the perception of reality and responsibility within the mind of the player of violent video games, by presenting the body of the player as an object within that reality, which cannot be objectively manipulated through the avatar of a video game. The regenerative ability of the characters in Relentless also makes reference to these ideas of immortality and where that may leave the viewer/player’s perception of death and violence.

Bang Bang (You’re Not Dead?) © 2002 Kathleen Ruiz
CHAPTER FOUR: Death and Violence in *Relentless* and *Fluff Snuffs* and a Comparison of These Issues to Other Contemporary Art Works.

*Fluff-Snuffs* and *Relentless* can both be seen as amusing or funny representations of death. The concepts of death and violence are explored in order to understand how they operate within the two works. The dictionary definitions of death, mortality and violence are included here, as defining these terms can be complex and difficult.

Death: 1. **the permanent end of all functions of life in an organism.** 2. an instance of this. 3. **a murder or killing.** 4. termination or destruction.

Mortality: 1. **the condition of being mortal** and ‘Mortal: 1. (of living beings, esp. humans beings) subject to death.

Violence: 1. **the exercise or an instance of physical force, usually effecting or intended to effect injuries, destruction etc.** 2. powerful, untamed, or devastating force: the violence of the sea. 3. **great strength of feeling, as in language, etc.** 4. an unjust, unwarranted, or unlawful display of force. 5. do violence to. a. to inflict harm upon. b. to distort the sense or intention of.

These definitions provide an important touchstone for the works, as death and violence are present in the work in a number of forms, exploring the trivial, the abstract and the personified through the sensory experiences of physical forces and the ephemeral and intuitive world of feelings.

The violence represented in *Fluff Snuffs* explores the uncertainty and inevitability of death. The violent act of running something over in your car is

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usually accidental. The victims in *Fluff Snuffs* are unfortunate in their demise. The tight focusing on the teddy bears body as it gets run over doesn’t allow for any clues as to who or what the driver of the vehicle could be, therefore the relationship between the inflictor of violence and the inflicted is non-existent.

*Relentless* was presented in a cyclical way, whereby the character dies and regenerates every 5 minutes. With this *Relentless* presents a different view on death, almost that it is unavoidable, but also cheatable. Assailant characters in *Relentless* carry visible guns and knives, man-made weapons of destruction. Therefore, making the protagonists identifiable to the viewer, while the victim character maintains gunshots and stab wounds. This dispassionate use of weapons in *Relentless* comments on the violent state of civilisation. Psychoanalyst Stanley Schneider speculates;

*There seems to almost be a contradiction in terms. A cultured person should be behaving in a civilised manner, yet we find that as man has advanced in civilisation, he has become increasingly more violent and warlike* (Gumble 1973).34

The use of fantasy, humour and absurd violence in these works allows them to explore an unacceptance of death and dying. The artist Damian Hirst challenges our acceptance of death with his work *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1992). A preserved tiger shark in a tank of formaldehyde presents something dead to the viewer, as well as something that could cause death, in a non-threatening way. By animating the inanimate, *Fluff Snuffs* and *Relentless*, also bring forth the idea of physical impossibilities, as discussed here by Hirst in regard to his work,

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...I hope at first glance it will look alive. It could have to do with the obsession with trying to make the dead live or the living live forever.\textsuperscript{35}

The soft toys and doll hybrids seem to experience something close to death, the empathy we feel as viewers toward these personified characters, may lead the viewer to think about their own mortality. Hirst's other works of dissected or whole animal parts are also displayed in glass cases, which allows him to present violence and death in a distanced and clinical way.

This "detached, distanced, oddly smiling presentation of violence... the new kind of ghostly frozen, remote look at death and suffering" was given a name- the High Morbid Manner.\textsuperscript{36}

It opens a path for the viewer into areas of experience, which are not anti-moral or amoral, but extra-moral. We take a holiday from our ethics into a world created from death and violence about which we are invited not to care- a world where bad taste is driven to the point of elegance, and disgust filtered into delight.\textsuperscript{37}

This can also be said for Relentless and Fluff Snuffs as the viewer is presented with violence and death in a similar way. The acts of violence occur within the works in a cold, clinical form, the cinematography and neutral lighting lacks mood or atmosphere. These aesthetic qualities find resonance with this idea of 'the High Morbid Manner'. The television monitors that Fluff Snuffs and Relentless are displayed on act like the containers and glass casings in Hirst's works forming similar conceptual barriers for representations of danger, death and violence, thus emphasising this lack of care.

Chris Burden's Shoot (1971), where the artist was shot in the arm by a collaborator at a gallery opening addresses the issues of the bystander in

\textsuperscript{35} Hirst, D I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere, with everyone, one to one, always, forever, now. (p. 7), Booth-Clibborn Editions United Kingdom. (1997)
\textsuperscript{36} Hirst, D I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere, with everyone, one to one, always, forever, now. (p. 8), Booth-Clibborn Editions United Kingdom. (1997)
regards to viewing violence. Violence is presented in an arts context as well as a live context in Burden’s work. The artist is shot and that is the performance. It presents the near-death experience of being shot for the artist and allows the viewer to experience the sounds, smells and blood of a live shooting. The viewer is placed in the position of bystander by the nature of the violent act being presented as an art form. This idea of the audience as bystander is very important to *Fluff Snuffs* and *Relentless* as it also places the viewer in a passive position. The violent acts are presented to the viewer as spectacle.

*Shoot’s primary audience, its constitutive little public, was in a position analogous to that of witnesses who see but do not intervene in a violent street crime.*

The word “witness” is used here to describe the audience members or viewers of Burden’s performance. The viewers of Burden’s performance could be seen as witnesses to a crime, because the act of shooting someone has references to criminal activity. If the performance had played out differently and Burden’s collaborator had shot Burden fatally, the viewers of this performance would have become witnesses. The viewers would have to give testimony to the event, but not to a crime, but to a performance that went wrong, because the collaborator had a signed consent form from Burden.

What I am interested in here is the apparent lack of intervention by the audience. This places them in the position of bystanders, “Bystander Effect: the phenomenon that when many people observe a crime or someone in trouble, each of them is less likely to intervene than when only one person is present”.

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37 Hirst, D I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere, with everyone, one to one, always, forever, now. (p.7 )Booth-Clibborn Editions United Kingdom. (1997)
This phenomenon is described in reference to a crime or to the event of someone in trouble, so can it be applied to art? I think it can, because no matter how informed the viewers are and how organised the performances or events, human instinct will still override the knowledge of any safeguards involved.

This “bystander effect” occurs within Relentless and Fluff Snuffs. The viewer isn’t a part of an audience as such, but the events presented to them are events that they cannot change the consequences of, leaving the viewer as a spectator. This leads to the creating of space between the viewer and the violence within the work, a reference to the denial of death that the work entails.

The violent acts in Relentless are set in a domestic environment and the teddy bears in Fluff Snuffs are run over in a common road scape. In these works death can occur anywhere and anytime. As in Andy Warhol’s Knives (1981 - 1982) series, the screen printed images of domestic kitchen knives express the ability of the viewer’s imagination to make their own associations of violence to objects that are common place within the home. Warhol represented the imagery of a domestic kitchen knife in a macabre way by using photography and screen print to recreate the imagery of a dozen knives as,

...strangely ghostlike themes and variations that belied their utilitarian character, which might range from cooking to murder.\(^40\)

This association to the range of uses for a knife within Warhol’s work is similar to Fluff Snuffs and Relentless’ use of domestic and common environments. The idea that any common object can be used as a weapon is made even more apparent in thriller/horror movies, where the weapon of choice by the assailant, is usually something that can be found around the home eg/ the kitchen knife in Scream and the chainsaw in Halloween.

\(^40\) Roseblum, R Andy Warhol Knives (p.12) Jabloka Galerie Salon Verlay, Koln (1998)
By exaggerating the elements that make death and violence unrealistic and generalised, *Fluff Snuffs* and *Relentless* make the familiar unfamiliar and present a meditation on the nature of death and violence as foreboding, relentless and inevitable. An invitation to think rather than accept.

*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* © 1992
Damien Hirst
Shoot © 1971 Chris Burden

CHAPTER FIVE: Where to From There, Trigger Displacement (2002)

Trigger Displacement is a single channel video animation of video noise that has been effected with 3d software so that it appears slightly three dimensional. This surface gradually begins to mutate and shift as a three-dimensional surface aberration in the form of a crude handgun pushes in, out and around the surface creating the appearance that the video transmission matrix contains some kind of inherent threat.

The following is a synopsis of Trigger Displacement written in early 2002. It is included here as a starting point in this discussion as it forms an important reference point for the thoughts and feelings I had about the work then and the different thoughts I have about the work now.

Trigger Displacement is a play on word as well as a play with animation, the full image of a gun is hidden through the displacement and tight focussing of the animated viewport of 3D animating software. The viewer is not given all the information that the image contains and therefore viewing is restricted. Restricted, in the sense that the violent symbolism shown is not fully clear, yet the work does not restrict the viewing of ‘violence’ (violence, meaning the violence that is associated with the image of a gun). This triggers an effect whereby the viewer becomes displaced, as they are neither viewing violence nor viewing restricted images of violence.

When I read back on my thoughts about this work, I’m talking about it in the sense of how I viewed it as I know there is an image of a gun under the animated video noise. The gun makes a clear appearance towards the end of the work, but I wouldn’t say the viewer would be aware that they were viewing an image of a gun through the majority of the work. In my synopsis I described this work as a trigger or a catalyst for unsettling the viewer. I felt that the work explored the insidiousness of violence and the lack of choice of the viewer to choose what they were seeing. I feel the work may trigger more than this now, but upon closer inspection I find Trigger Displacement to be as
aesthetically hypnotic and calming as Fluff Snuffs and Relentless. Its constant humming sound, its subtle transitions and the minimal colour in this piece make the work seem slow and constant when technically it’s intense and evolves at high speed. The psychoanalytical definition of displacement can also give more of an insight to the affects of this work.

*Displacement: 3. (psychoanalytical) the transformation of emotional feelings from their original object to one that disguises their real nature.*

It looks like nothing (video noise) yet it contains something, a threatening object. The work does not reveal its threatening nature to the viewer through violence, the violent ‘nature’ of the content of the work is the fact that it’s hidden or disguised till the end.

*Trigger Displacement* perhaps tries to address more of an inner violence, the violence that occurs within the mind through the catatonic nature of media images and perhaps the memory of violence. The lingering thoughts in the back of your mind come forward, the paranoiac thoughts of what next or when next, what is threatening and where am I safe? When considering this paranoia: “a mental disorder characterised by any of several types of delusions, as of grandeur or persecution or Intense fear or suspicion, especially when unfounded”

This ‘intense fear or suspicion’ perhaps experienced by the viewer when viewing the subtle images of violence presented within *Trigger Displacement* relates to the psychological vectors propagating the contemporary culture of fear. This is a phenomenon that has become more prevalent since the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001. The paranoia manifests itself within a person as a general fear of the unknown and a fear for their safety, whereby any situation can lead to their death or harm. This relates back to the phenomenon that occurs with the

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viewing of television violence by children, the ‘victim effect’, whereby ‘increased levels of fearfulness, mistrust, and self-protective behaviour towards others’⁴³ may be felt by the viewer of Tele-visually mediated violence. Feelings of fear in the form of anxiety are described as one of the symptoms associated with what American psychiatrists are calling the ‘September 11 Syndrome’⁴⁴;

_Fear is an emotion that arises from the perception of danger… But, when fear has no object or specific target—in other words, it is a free-floating worry and tension not tethered to the perception of a clear and present danger, it’s name is anxiety… Over time, that anxiety can create a sense of gloom and dread along with a generalised pessimism about life now and in the future._⁴⁵

What I am interested in here is this generalised pessimism which is experienced by a person after witnessing such traumatic displays of violence as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre. _Trigger Displacement_ reinforces this sense of suspicion and pessimism within contemporary media through its use of a hidden and secretive threat. One could argue that _Trigger Displacement_ is only an animated representation of violence and can not be compared to a large-scale event such as September 11. But it is believed by most that even the viewing of the attacks via the television can trigger the stressful effects described above.

_Watching the World Trade Centre towers, even on television, attacked in real time and collapse qualifies as exposure to a traumatic event._⁴⁶

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⁴³ Levin, D _Remote Control Childhood: Combating The Hazards Of Media Culture_ (p.14) the National association For The Education Of Young Children (1998)

⁴⁴ “What does remain is the essence of the September 11 Syndrome – a chronic stress response with two core symptom groups: (1) a pervasive sense of tension, worry, fear and anxiety; (2) a pervasive, low-grade depression, sense of helplessness, and loss of control” Braiker, H _The September 11 Syndrome: Anxious Days and Sleepless Nights_ (p.46) The McGraw-Hill Companies Inc (2002)


Video noise\textsuperscript{47} or "snow"\textsuperscript{48} in \textit{Trigger Displacement} signifies an absence of signal or an interruption or disturbance, which breaks that signal or content.

The video noise or "snow" represents the moment of no image or disrupted image, an in-between state, in-between channels, in-between signals. This component is very important, as the work seems to be posing the question of what's being transmitted when nothing is being transmitted, which relates to the ideas of suspicion. Or perhaps leaves the work open for the viewer to see what is not there. Often after people have viewed the work, they have seen things within the "snow" that aren't actually there.

Not only does \textit{Trigger Displacement} address the psychological perspective of displacement and paranoia, but this title also refers to its technical production. The work was produced by taking the imagery of video noise and diffusing it onto the surface of a plane within \textit{Discreet 3D Studio Max}, a 3D modelling program. Video imagery of an animated 3D model of a gun was used to displace this plane, as well as varying lighting techniques. The video images produced were then imported back into \textit{Discreet 3D Studio Max} to further displace more planes, which then produced layers of displacement. Final animated images where then blended into each other using Adobe After Effects' colour keying, masking, differing transfer modes, and colouring effects. The sound is a simple recording of television static, and the beeps at the start and end are directly recorded off the mini-disc player used to sample the sound.

So, therefore, within the imagery of \textit{Trigger Displacement} is the actual dual effect of digitally\textsuperscript{49} displacing a trigger of a model gun and using this gun as a

\textsuperscript{47} "Noise: A general term used in electronics to indicate any unwanted electrical signal, unrelated to the original signal. Video noise is generally manifested as snow, graininess, ghost images or picture static induced by external sources such as the national power-line grid, electric motors, fluorescent lamps, etc. In audio, noise is generally manifested as hiss and static." \texttt{http://www.thescratchpost.com/resources/fx/vfx_diet_n.shtml} \textsc{THESCRATCHPOST.com, Inc (1997 – 2003)}

\textsuperscript{48} "Snow" is visual noise caused by a weak signal, poor antenna system, the set itself, or a combination of these\textsuperscript{50} \texttt{http://www.tvantenna.com/support/tutorials/uhf.html} "A Guide to UHF TV Reception" (2003)
trigger for one’s imagination. Trigger Displacement explores the hidden and the subliminal, it literalises or makes real, ideas of there being something in the nothing.

Video Still From Trigger Displacement © 2002 Mel Donat
Video Still From *Trigger Displacement* © 2002 Mel Donat

Developed from ideas of television viewing, *Bathing in A Warm Glow of Nothing* is an interactive DVD installation, which incorporates the installation of a ‘television room’ within the gallery space.

The ‘television room’ consists of a room within a room where each room contains a television, wall rug, chair, TV table, lamp and lamp table. The DVD component of this work displays imagery that mirrors the physical ‘television room’ but has the added feature of animated television noise, which is capable of mutating and moving across the virtual space. Audience members are encouraged to sit in the ‘television room’ and flick through the animated sequences, via a standard remote control. Through this selection of channels viewers move the animated television noise from one piece of furniture to another.

People watch each other interacting with the work or ‘flicking’ through the channels via the remote control, observing the changes and each other’s exploration of how we interact with television. David Rokeby has discussed interactive art’s ability to represent ourselves in his paper *Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media* where he states that,

> A technology is interactive to the degree that it reflects the consequences of our actions or decisions back to us. It follows that an interactive technology is a medium through which we communicate with ourselves – a mirror.49

This is the simplest of Rokeby’s theories regarding interactive technologies and this idea is enough to comment on the simplistic interactive component of *Bathing in A Warm Glow of Nothing*. The interactivity of pressing the channel switches on a remote is quite basic and has been experienced by most people as a part of watching television.

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So in presenting this activity within the gallery space the work allows for a critical viewing of the activity by the participants. If a mirroring of the participant is occurring then the participant will realise that their actions govern the changing of the image and the participant experiences an exploration of self. In this instance the audience members or spectators, who are viewing the participant changing channels are not only exploring their role as spectators, but are also participating in the role of being spectators.

Many players enjoy the attention of the audience, and the rapport that comes from the collective experience. Other people might be intimidated by spectators, afraid of looking foolish because of a perceived lack of knowledge, or body conscious and uncomfortable being watched.\(^{50}\)

I have taken this aspect of interactivity into consideration and made the space as comfortable and ‘homely’ as I could by using domestic 70s furniture, dim lighting and a small space.

Marshall McLuhan, a 1960’s “professor of literature turned communications analyst and prophet”\(^{51}\) proposed ideas of television being a cool medium because of its ease of interaction\(^{52}\).

Any medium, McLuhan asserts...is an extension of man, and because of electricity man’s central nervous system has become extended outside his body. The content itself of television, for example, is therefore less important than its effects, in making man a screen, or in intensifying his tactile and kinetic powers. TV, which McLuhan finds to be low in definition and to require audience “involvement”, is a “cool” medium.\(^{53}\)

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\(^{50}\) Winkler, T “Audience Participation and Response in Movement-Sensing Installations” Abstract for MacColl Studio for Electronic Music, Brown University


\(^{52}\) McLuhan, M Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (p.308-337) McGraw-Hill (1964)

My work aims to explore an idea that as the viewer interacts with television via the remote control (or the extension of the central nervous system) the television merges with the space in which it is viewed. I have achieved this by the literal representations of migrating television noise within the DVD component of the work and through the work’s interactivity.

_Bathing in A Warm Glow of Nothing_ presents a private space within the public space of the gallery. The presence of the televisions, and the migrating noise establishes another kind of perceptual space between the role of the user/viewer and the resulting interactions.

The user/viewer cycles through the different experiences of the spaces within the work moving through; Conscious Space of the User/Viewer > Gallery Space > Domestic Space > Tele-visual Space > Domestic Space (re-represented) > Tele-visual Space (re-represented) > Void (animated television noise) > Conscious Space of the User/Viewer.

The work requires the physical presence of a user to watch television and thus complete the work by re-creating the private space of the ‘television room’. The act of watching becomes an abstinence from engaging with the gallery surroundings, ie reality. The work leads the user into a role, that of participant and abstainer. The user abstains as they participate.

_Every TV viewers are able to see ‘life’s parade at their fingertips’, but at the cost of exempting themselves from that parade for the duration of their TV viewing._

Participant becomes spectator, spectator becomes participant. This is the exemption of self from reality, whilst watching the broadcasting of reality.

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Paul Virilio, a twentieth century French cultural theorist, has discussed this contradictory idea of becoming inactive through activities with electronic mediums, as follows,

_The urbanization of real time is in fact the urbanization of one's own body plugged into various interfaces (keyboards, cathode screens, DataGloves or DataSuits), prostheses that make the super-equipped able person almost the exact equivalent of the motorized and wired disabled person... Having been first mobile, then motorized, man will thus become motile, deliberately limiting his body's area of influence to a few gestures, a few impulses like channel surfing._

Here Virilio makes a direct reference to the physically inactive activity of channel surfing, via the use of a remote control.

The domestic images of normality presented within the animation are manipulated giving the work an hallucinogenic and luminous quality. Animated television noise flickers from the television screen to the lounge chair and then to the lamp or table in accordance to which channel the viewer has selected. The re-representation of normality has become infected by television that has escaped the screen.

Using television as a mechanism to effect reality, this work differs from the earlier works, _Fluff Snuffs_ and _Relentless_ in that there is an element of immersion and a resulting distraction associated with television. As television is an entertainment medium, people often use the viewing of television as a means of relaxing and 'switching off' from their everyday concerns or thoughts.

_Bathing in A Warm Glow of Nothing_ comments on this element of escapism and diversion from reality. The participant experiences a problem, the reality they are escaping from is being represented within the medium that they are

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55 Virilio, P as quoted by McQuire, Scott in “Space For Rent In The Last Suburb” _Prefiguring Cybertulture: an Intellectual History_ (p.175) Power Institute Foundation for Art and Culture (2002)
escaping into. The television in this interactive video art installation has been presented in a contemporary art context, the viewer cannot escape themselves or their surroundings, in the way that the everyday experience of television usually allows them to.

_Bathing in A Warm Glow of Nothing_ aims to explore television as, not only an extension of ourselves, but also as a mirror. The work can be seen as a mirror through the presentation of the already existing mirror of television (McLuhan)\(^56\) and the mirroring of self that occurs in the work’s format as an interactive art form (Rokeby). I feel that in television’s ‘coolness’ it allows for the interaction and extension of man into that of a passive or reactive participant. The activity of interacting becomes, as I have stated earlier, the activity of inactivity. It is as if, as the work’s title suggests, one can let oneself be immersed in an all encompassing void of inactivity.

\(^56\) “This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perception until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image... He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system”. The myth of Narcissus is used by McLuhan to examine the relationship between the television and the viewer. This is where McLuhan uses the idea of television as a mirror and in reference to Narcissus this involves the viewer of television becoming a ‘closed system’. “ McLuhan. M _Understanding Media_ (p.51) McGraw-Hill (1964)
Video Still from *Bathing In a Warm Glow of Nothing* © 2003 Mel Donat
CHAPTER SEVEN: Memory Play Back (2003)

In this chapter I will discuss my most recent work Memory Play Back. I will discuss this work in reference to critical discussions of other artists’ exploration of the soft toy rabbit, the psychoanalytical role of the soft toy in childhood and my own understandings of memory and trauma.

Memory Play Back is a combination of physical and virtual actions and reactions. A soft toy rabbit fitted with internal switches sits in the space of the gallery. As counterpart to the soft toy rabbit, a 3D animated rabbit is projected on the wall of the gallery. When users interact with the work, by pressing the switches in the soft toy, an animated sequence of the virtual rabbit is played via a hidden computer. Whilst animated sequences are being triggered the live sound of the hidden computer processing and cooling itself is amplified throughout the space.

Like Fluff Snuffs and Relentless, Memory Play Back uses the form of the soft toy, but in this case it’s a custom built rabbit which provides the user with a guide into the work. Audience members may experience memories of play and a reminiscence of childhood by interacting with the soft-toy rabbit. This experience is then juxtaposed against the visual component of the work, which is eerily slow in movement and has a visually strange moving texture of video noise. This relationship between the soft toy rabbit and its 3D noise counterpart poses the larger question as to where the memory play back is coming from.

Mike Kelley has used the form of the soft toy in his five-year project, Half a Man, which “addressed gender and identity formation, as it occurs, in the Freudian sense, at childhood”57. This project included the works known as Arenas (1990), which involved the placement of found cloth dolls, teddy bears and other miscellaneous soft toys on or under Afghan rugs. Due to the empathetic nature of the form of the soft toy, often the situations presented to

the viewer allowed the viewer to read the works from an analytical or imaginative perspective. The viewer could imagine that “different bizarre enactments (between two animals or one animal) appeared to be taking place”\textsuperscript{58}.

But the vestiges of performance-based work survived in Half a Man in the form of surrogate “actors” (they were stuffed animals). And these actors became the ridiculous embodiment upon which empathy is projected.\textsuperscript{59}

I have incorporated the stuffed rabbit as the interface for this work as a way of engaging with this idea of the soft-toy as “actor”, as the performer for the viewer, as a means of leading the viewer through the content of Memory Play Back. The viewer will play with the soft toy rabbit and through this play the viewer will be able to engage and navigate through the animated component of the work. The soft-toy becomes a “transitional object” guiding the viewer through the internal realm of the work.

Winnicott’s idea of the soft toy as “transitional object”, identifies certain types of objects which symbolically bridge the gap between the internal world of the child and external real world of the “not me” around the child.

When symbolism is employed the infant is already clearly distinguishing between fantasy and fact, between inner objects and external objects, between primary creativity and perception.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{58} Sussman, E Mike Kelley : 1985-1996 (pg.32) Musee d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (1996)
\textsuperscript{59} Sussman, E Mike Kelley : 1985-1996 (pg.31) Musee d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (1996)
\textsuperscript{60} Winnicott, D Playing and Reality (p.6) Routledge Great Britain (1991)
When considering *Memory Play Back*, the transition seems to be moving from the external world of reality within the gallery space to the internal world of the computer mediated animation. A moving back and forth from fantasy and fact is taking place through the transitional object within this work. An exploration of self and memory can be experienced through this movement. This is achieved through the viewer’s physical interaction with the soft toy, whereby the pressing of switches triggers imagery and that imagery is registered and recalled as connected to that part of the soft toy rabbit. If the viewer is to press that switch again the same imagery will be triggered, an act of recall or replay. In this sense the viewer becomes the point of recall for the work. These two worlds/spaces; the external world of the viewer and the soft-toy within the gallery and the internal world where the digitally created imagery lies, explore ideas of real and fantasy becoming one within this work, or affecting each other.

The name for the work *Memory Play Back*, is taken from the two functions on electronic audio and video recording devices, called “Memory Play” and “Play Back”. With “Memory Play” any recorded audio or imagery can be traced and “played back” to you from the electronic equipment’s storage devices or what is termed its memory. The work’s title references this function of technology, as does its format, as an electronic interactive installation, but it also refers to the memory of the human mind. *Memory Play Back* may resemble the process of tracing or tracking one’s memory to where memories are stored in the mind in an effort to “play back” those memories or re-live those experiences.

When developing the work I was considering the idea of traumatic memories and the difficult process of recalling previous experiences that have been repressed and how to give an idea of exploring memory through the use of a stimulant or transitional object within the work.

The use of the word “Play” is also important in the title for this piece as through the process of playing with the rabbit the viewer experiences the
work. This relates back to the psychotherapeutic notions of play as therapy, as discussed earlier in Chapter Two. Play is used as a possible means of dealing with or re-experiencing a traumatic event in a safe way, but Memory Play Back uses this sense of security normally associated with a transitional object to challenge the viewer. For example, when one of the soft toy’s eye switches is pressed the animated sequence displays the camera quickly moving in towards the rabbit’s eye, giving the impression that the rabbit is being poked in the eye. It shakes its head and seems to push the viewer/camera away. Most of the animated sequences display an annoyed and frustrated character, which is different from its physically comforting furry counterpart. These apparent reactions have a subtlety that allows them to be interpreted as representations of either the psyche of the rabbit or the viewer.

This subjective nature of memory and the image associations relates to the theory of the mortality of the image as described by Video Artist, Bill Viola.

*The Physical apparatus of the moving image necessitates its existence as a primarily mental phenomenon. The viewer sees only one image at a time in the case of film and, more extreme, only the decay trace of a single moving point of light in video. In either case, the whole does not exist (except in a dormant state coiled up in the can or tape box), and therefore can only reside in the mind of the person who has seen it, to be periodically revived through their memory. Conceptual and physical movement become equal, experience becomes a language, and an odd sort of concreteness emerges from the highly abstract, metaphysical nature of the medium.*

The moving image of video is seen by Viola to only exist in the memory of the person who has viewed the moving image. I find the “revived” moving image in this sense to be similar conceptually to the recollection of memories of repressed experiences. I can see a correlation between the recalling of the moving image (that fast beam of light that has tricked us into creating

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movement) and the recalling of what someone has repressed through trauma (the ability of the mind to store experiences deep down in the mind, dormant), the deception of forgetting.

This leads me back to Mike Kelley and one of his projects that didn't incorporate soft-toys, but that looked at the phenomenon in the United States of America known within the psychotherapeutic world as "Repressed Memory Syndrome". This Syndrome is the notion that "memories of traumatic experiences can be completely and unconsciously blocked and made inaccessible to the conscious mind". This syndrome was the basis for his works, Missing Time (1974-1995), which involved the artist exploring his painting from the 70s and enhancing them by going through the process of recall.

*The point was not to change the meaning of the original works but to make them stronger in their own terms. I wanted to regain as much of the original mind set of the period as I could, to mentally return to that time. It was an exercise in self-discovery.*

This exercise in "self-discovery" and a returning to a specific time was what I was contemplating in the process of making Memory Play Back. The use of video noise, as discussed earlier in reference to Trigger Displacement is again used as a means of presenting no image as well as exploring the nature of the medium of video noise. This use of "snow" allows space for the viewer's imagination, the idea that amongst all the noise there may be hidden imagery or hidden memory. Amongst the video noise there may be meaning or coherence within the incoherent. This also relates to the debate with "Repressed Memory Syndrome" as to whether all the memories recalled through therapy are actually true.

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63 Chapter Five p. 24
Perhaps through the use of the soft toy the player can recall a place or time, in an effort to regain these dormant memories. Painter, Mark Ryden, has used the soft toy imagery of a rabbit within his works along-side images that symbolise science and soul. Ryden’s use of the ‘bunny’, the cute and benevolent representation of the real-life rabbit, leads the imagery of the ‘bunny’ into another realm of interest.

_The stuffed variety of bunnies Ryden has a penchant for are generally more soothing than a cup of hot chocolate and provide almost as much security as mommy. Yet there can be something sinister about bunnies. Those frozen facial expressions can be haunting._

Within *Memory Play Back* the bunny is presented in all its ‘soothing’ capacity within the gallery space, but connects up with and is made alive through its ‘sinister’ counterpart. The soft-toy rabbit within the gallery space is represented within the animated video space as a giant, over bearing entity. It is almost like the video representation of the rabbit is an unhealthy counteraction to it’s inanimate self that serves the viewer within the gallery space.

Ryden has used the image of the ‘bunny’ in most of his works. He has an interest in opposites and the acceptance of those opposites. He uses opposing ideas of science and the soul, of the physical and the spiritual. *Memory Play Back*, may have an interest in these opposites of materiality and consciousness, as consciousness is where memory resides. The work has a physical component, that of the soft toy rabbit and more ephemeral component, that of the moving beam of light of video, as described by Viola.

In his work *Little Boy Blue* Ryden describes this interest in opposites.

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I am fascinated by the contrast of innocent and evil. The swastika in pink and baby blue instead of the strong red and black intrigues me.  

I have also been fascinated by juxtapositions of innocence and evil within my works. The animated component of the piece was designed and modelled as an idealised rabbit figure within 3D Studio Max, which had all the qualities of cuteness that can be associated with the idea of a ‘bunny’ ie: large feet, big tummy and floppy ears. Once the modelling process was complete, I set about subverting this cuteness by manipulating the object’s skin, distorting his overall shape and using intimidating camera angles and movements in the rendering stage. As well as this I added a strange glitching ‘tick’ during post-production to further enhance his disconcerting nature.

Jeff Koons’ Rabbit, a stainless steel replica of an inflatable toy rabbit is also an example of this kind of contrast and contradiction within an artwork,

*With “Rabbit”, Koons is questioning the idea of consumerism – these inflatable toys are such a common, everyday item found in shops. He is also looking at the idea of deception - rabbits are commonly associated with their warm, soft, furry texture, but in this artwork, Koons has made the rabbit out of cold, hard metal, and it provides a stark contrast.*

Although Koons’ Rabbit is exploring consumer culture, his use of the contrasting elements of assumed softness and physical hardness, are similar to Memory Play Back’s use of contrasts between the perceived visual component and the physical component of the work.

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66 Ryden, M Mark Ryden: Bunnies and Bees figure (p.31) Porterhouse Fine Art Editions (2002)
Detail from *Little Boy Blue* © 2001 Mark Ryden

*Rabbit* © 1986 Jeff Koon

Detail from *Jessica’s Hope* © 2001 Mark Ryden
The manipulation of time has been a re-occurring theme within stories, pictures and the moving image and this relates to the concept of regressing to gain memories hidden or forgotten. Many writers and artists have used the rabbit form as a keeper or a guide through time or as a manipulator of time. Mark Ryden in his work, *Jessica’s Hope* has a girl riding a cart on “the journey of life” driven by a rabbit. Lewis Carrol’s White Rabbit in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is Alice’s guide and has a watch in his waistcoat pocket. Even more contemporary uses of the image of the rabbit as a manipulator of time can be seen in the movie *Donnie Darko*. Within the movie the character of Frank, who has shifted reality and time, is wearing a sinister looking outfit of a rabbit.

The concepts behind memory and the mind and what one may perceive to be true are also related to *Memory Play Back*’s medium as an interactive installation that incorporates the use of digital technologies. The tactility of the soft-toy as interface with triggers or switches was a way of exploring ideas of the conscious, by incorporating the sense of touch to the work along side the sense of sight and sound. McLuhan discusses perception and how rationality is a combination of the senses and how digital technologies can change how we perceive reality,

> The “commons sense” was for many centuries held to be the peculiar human power of translating one kind of experience of one sense into all senses, and presenting the result continuously as a unified image to the mind. In fact, this image of a unified ratio among the senses was long held to be the mark of our rationality, and may in the computer age easily become so again. For it is now possible to program ratios among the senses that approach the condition of consciousness. Yet such a condition would necessarily be an extension of our own consciousness as much as wheel is an extension of feet in rotation. Having extended or translated our

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68 Ryden, M Mark Ryden: Bunnies and Bees figure (p.34) Porterhouse Fine Art Editions (2002)
69 “Percept 1. A concept that depends on recognition by the senses, such as sight, of some external object or phenomenon” Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus (p.844) Harper Collins Publishers, Glasgow (1993)
central nervous system into the electromagnetic technology, it is but a further stage to transfer our consciousness to the computer world as well.

McLuhan is discussing an extension of our consciousness into the digital world of computers. With Memory Play Back I wish to only make a reference to the idea of consciousness in the form of experiencing an artwork that combines the use of electricity, fur, sound and image to create an overall perceived experience for the viewer.

Memory Play Back uses the effect of contrast and contradiction to create an environment that combines fantasy and reality in an artwork that challenges assumptions about soft toys and their associations, yet still allows the viewer to cuddle and relate to the soft toy rabbit while navigating their way through imagery that may create unease or confusion.
Video Still from *Memory Play Back* © 2003 Mel Donat

Video Still from *Memory Play Back* © 2003 Mel Donat
CONCLUSION: A Final Thought

I have come to understand the relationships my works have to each other through the exploration of common themes that focus on the representations of violence and death, as well as ideas related to trauma and memory.

*Fluff Snuffs* and *Relentless* embrace television as an entertaining format and they use this quality to address difficult content in a playful way. *Bathing in A Warm Glow of Nothing* also embraces television with its effective elements of distraction and escapism. The work seems to be presenting the viewer with a familiar reality, but something isn’t quite right, and this is where an exploration of the mediative abilities of television and its possible negative effects are looked at further. Even though these works are not entertainment as such they all use the familiarity of television and animation to their peculiar advantage.

The element of the soft toy is used within three of the works in different ways. In *Fluff Snuffs* the soft toys are presented as victims, in *Memory Play Back* as a guide, and within *Relentless* as assailant or criminal. Yet all three works exploit the anthropomorphic element of the soft toy form and elicit an empathetic response from the viewer, especially when dealing with disturbing and transgressive content. Many artists have used these elements extensively in their work. The soft toy has been used by Mark Ryden for its ability to be both sinister and comforting and by Jeff Koons as a visual contradiction. But within my works, and similarly to Mike Kelley, it has been used for its possible emotional content and sentimental value to the viewer.

All five works use the computer or Tele-visual mediation as a way of distorting or subverting the sourced content, whether it is through analogue reversing of video, 2D animated compositions of mixed doll limbs and soft toy bodies or 3D displacement of video noise. The works seem to be communicating that this abstraction through computer mediation affects imagery mostly in a negative but curiously humorous way. These representations amplify the distortions or deceptions normally avoided within reality.
Although the four works, Fluff Snuffs, Relentless, Trigger Displacement and Memory Play Back have included some uneasy elements (representations or suggestions of violence, death or trauma) the works appear to be saying different things about these subjects. Fluff Snuffs and Relentless use their reference to entertainment to distract the viewer from the content presented and Trigger Displacement manages to simultaneously create and disguise its uneasy content through computer manipulation. This exploration of traumatic elements or difficult content is being dealt with subtly within Memory Play Back through the works’ use of interactivity and the transitional object of the soft toy rabbit interface. Due to the viewer’s ability to direct the work through interaction, a mixture of reality and fantasy is experienced, which makes Memory Play Back seem less foreboding.

The idea of temporality that is associated with life and the other transients suggested in the title of this paper is referenced the most within Memory Play Back, where the ‘life’ of the art work is solely governed by the viewer. The work lies frozen almost dead until the viewer brings it out of its coma and into life. As an artist dealing with these temporal ideas I have tried to control and make these ideas and the works constant and everlasting, but like life they are not. Through the shifting from analogue to digital and from repetition to interaction, I can see that the haze that lies over these works is beginning to clear, which has revealed a bigger picture of acceptance and understanding of things that should be feared.
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