


refrain state
billy foshay

master of fine arts thesis
school of the museum of fine arts at tufts



The following document contains Billy Foshay's Master of Fine Arts thesis statement and exhibition plan for *refrain state*, his thesis work to be exhibited in 2020 or 2021.

Billy Foshay b. 1993 in Morristown, NJ

Billy's work examines the intersection of psychoanalysis, media theory, and alienation arising out of a contemporary milieu that blurs the demarcations between physical and virtual, child and adult, process and outcome. He examines the disjunctive relationship between expectations of the mind and experiences of the body; a dichotomy accentuated by internet use, contemporary entertainment, and late-capitalist paradigms. He has done significant research and work on Depersonalization/Derealization Disorder — a state of detachment where one's body, thoughts, and feelings seem unreal, artificial, or as not belonging to oneself. The depersonalized state is a rich example of coping mechanisms for unstable, twenty-first-century orientations to the self, spatial relationships, time, and emotion. Billy's work has found a suitable home in virtual reality and computer-generated video to explore these concepts. Often, familiar environments are made strange through their conversion to a virtualized form and an exaggeration of their properties allowed by their digitality: a grocery store is ever more vibrant and organized, an escalator ride never ends, a virtual dentist administers too much laughing gas.

Billy currently lives and works in Boston, Massachusetts. He is expected to receive his MFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts in May of 2020, and previously received a B.S. from Boston College.

A Special Thank You To...

Thesis Advisors: Jane Gillooly and Patte Loper

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In discussing my thesis exhibition, *refrain state*, it is useful to outline the two streams of research I have been intersecting in the formation of my work: Depersonalization and the notion of the refrain.

I) Depersonalization: A Definition

I became interested in Depersonalization and Derealization Disorder (abbreviated DPDR or Depersonalization) through a prolonged, personal experience with it. Depersonalization is a dissociative anxiety disorder defined by a patient's prolonged sense of 'unreality'. Individuals experiencing DPDR often describe that waking life feels like living within a video game or dream – a feeling that your body and environment are fake, foreign, and synthetic. It is an intensely perceptual experience and fundamentally changes one's relationship to senses, self and thought. Common symptoms include feeling as though you are not in control of your movements or speech, surroundings that appear two-dimensional (as if viewing the world on a screen), inability to recognize oneself in the mirror, trouble with spatial relationships, emotional detachment, and difficulty grasping historical context. Depersonalization operates on a continuum. While it is identified as a disorder when symptoms last for months or years at a time, most individuals have experienced seconds or minutes in a depersonalized state. DPDR is not a break with reality (a psychosis) but instead is a detachment that the individual is hyper-aware of. This awareness perpetuates stress and anxiety as they attempt to regain a sense of reality. My thesis work adopts an aesthetic of disorder I have been developing for Depersonalization explored through mediums most suitable to the disorder - namely digitally rendered moving image.

The metaphysical alienation of Depersonalization has seen increased recognition and diagnosis in adolescents and young adults in the twenty-first century. Are the changing ways that young individuals relate to the world influencing an increased detachment towards their bodies, thoughts, and environments? Depersonalization like many anxiety disorders cites traumatic events as its predominant driver. However, many accounts of Depersonalization are incapable of attributing any acute traumatic event as the disorder's producer. Perhaps Depersonalization calls for a 'traumatics' of the every day. One that considers how diffuse cultural, social, economic, political, and technological trauma congeal into an alienation experienced perceptually by the individual.

I traveled to London to meet with and interview a community of psychiatrists, psychologists, cognitive scientists, philosophers, and patients who have dedicated their research practice to DPDR [1]. They are some of the only individuals studying Depersonalization as a stand-alone condition. I shared my personal accounts with them, as well as my interest in tethering the disorder to an expanded definition of cultural trauma brought on by the contemporary milieu. The conversations suggested that DPDR is a historically correlated condition, accentuated by new dynamics of relation in the twenty-first century. Published studies have found that "its prevalence is sensitive to cultural variation" and correlate a higher rate of Depersonalization among those located in individualistic cultures [2] - cultures dependent on capitalistic paradigms. Late-capitalism of the twenty-first century is the psycho-social engine of the depersonalized state. If the depersonalized's trouble is in locating and contextualizing the self in relation to their immediate surroundings, these symptoms are stoked by rampant capitalistic sensibilities that render the individual and their environments as exchangeable and abstract. While capitalism's weight of the previous century was manifested physically onto the body of the individual, today it is manifested onto the psyche. Contemporary forms of entertainment and communication technologies (inextricably tied to conformation and acceleration of capitalism) carry these sensibilities as well. The internet, virtual reality, and augmented reality place structures on top of physical spaces that make them infinitely vast and adaptable. Immediate space is therefore converted into 'any-space-whatever' [3]. It matters little where we find ourselves physically, as we are still able to converse with someone far away, experience a space that is elsewhere, adapt and adopt identities without ties to our immediate space. As with Depersonalization, the immediate, physical experience of the body and environment is made foreign and obsolete. There is no longer a foothold in the physical environment to orient the self. It becomes unrecognizable. This is the precarity and anxiety of intermediary space that the depersonalized individual finds themselves living in.

More generally, there are certain situations where symptoms of Depersonalization are externalized by the environment. These are spaces that the Depersonalized have the most difficulty coping with (long-escalator rides, grocery stores, or doctor's offices), but also spaces that may cause anxiety in a non-patient. One example that continually arose in meeting with patients in London is the experience of transit, in particular being on a bus, train, plane, or car. Here, the DPDR symptoms of "a lack of control" and "the world on a screen" are accentuated by the environment itself. As the vehicle moves, the body is physically stationary, and the experience of movement cannot be attributed to the action of the individual. The experience of transit is also much like the experience of the screen, where it appears as though a series of two-dimensional images are being thrust toward the individual. With the screen at the helm of contemporary life, the individual finds themselves in a perpetual state of transit(ion). Environments and apparatus such as these breed feelings of alienation and are key to understanding how the depersonalized state is inflicted on the individual.

The look and process of the artwork have been created to follow depersonalized sensibilities that include:

- Conversions between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space
- Unclear, disorienting spatial / size relationships
- Situated in environments troublesome for the depersonalized (transit, queues, limbo space)
- Uncanny digital representations of body, environment, and movement
- Depersonalized iconography: enlarged hands, nesting dolls, the screen, bright lights, etc.
- Logic and expressions of a regressed, child-like state
- Conversions between physical and virtual space
- Non-linear, experiential works

[1] This group included Anthony David (Director of UCL Institute of Mental Health), Elaine Hunter (Clinical Psychologist), Claudia Hallet (Clinical Lead of Depersonalisation Disorder Service), Jason Braithwaite (Reader in Cognitive Neuroscience at Lancaster University), Keisuke Suzuki (VR Studies on DPDR at Sackler Centre for Consciousness, University of Sussex), Anna Ciaunica (Institute of Philosophy of the University of Porto)

[2] Sierra-Siegert, Mauricio MD, PhD; David, Anthony S. MD Depersonalization and Individualism: The Effect of Culture on Symptom Profiles in Panic Disorder, *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*: December 2007 - Volume 195 - Issue 12 - p 989-995

[3] A term lifted from Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema I: The Movement Image*. Deleuze's 'any-space-whatever' is one devoid of context, a space of limbo – usually a close-up shot that denies all opportunities to situate the character or object in the environment.

II) Coping: The Refrain

The depersonalized state is akin to the state of the newborn infant. The newborn enters the world filled with panic and anxiety that accompany a new, unfamiliar state of relations. A philosopher I met with, Anna Ciaunica, offered that perhaps coping with depersonalization was much like helping newborns orient themselves to their new environment through repetitive, sense-synchronizing actions: rhythmic patting on the back, singing lullabies, rocking back and forth, repetitive game and phrases. Each of these sense-synchronizing actions forms a symbiosis between expectations and external perceptions that allow the child to form a framework for relating outward. Could these repetitive actions be adapted for the depersonalized adult to (re)locate the physical body in the immediate physical space they have been alienated from?

Schizoanalytic studies focused on the conversion between chaos and order, recognize that repetitive actions are capable of easing the individual out of an alienated state. These actions are referred to as *the refrain*. For Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, *the refrain* references the periodically repeated portion of a song or poem but also stands as a term for any return to the repeated action (this could be verbal, physical, mental). The function of the refrain is to reconstitute a controlled center, one capable of forging a recognizable situation. In a song, the refrain is the moment that allows a participant to catch up, to know the lyric, to know what line is coming next. For the depersonalized, the refrain could be adopted to help reconstitute relationships between body, environment, and thought.

While the refrain is a viable option for reconstituting predictable relationships and a guardian against detachment, it comes at a price. Participation in the refrain state is a desire for control that paradoxically requires submission to repetitive action. The refrain state is directionally opposed to generative, autonomous, and creative action. It is a vehicle of capture, control, and boundaries, one that can safeguard from chaotic existence at the price of limiting potentials, possibilities, and exploration. Here lies the complicated relationship between depersonalization and the escape from it. Today, I regard my experience with Depersonalization and Derealization as almost spiritual. It was the most creative, stimulating, and intense experience of my life. I also acknowledge that during the experience itself, I never wished to be part of it again and would have submitted myself to an endless refrain state to escape it.

The refrain is present in the thesis work in the following ways:

- Refrain as both verbal and physical repetition
- The works themselves to be experienced as a refrain: a seamless, never-ending loop
- The eerie affect of redundant action and over-extension of the refrain state
- The refrain as an act of control and as an act of submission

queue refrain, 2020. Single-Channel Video with Sound. 12 Minutes +14 Seconds.

queue refrain is a single-channel video forged out of explorations of Depersonalization and the refrain. A projection of four life-sized humanoid photogrammetry models wait in a stanchioned queue located in a context-less black space. The scene is digitally rendered in black and white. Upon reaching the front of the line, each character performs a refrain: repeating a word, reciting a prayer, chewing gum, singing a nursery rhyme. The refrain is performed as an act of self-soothing and re-orientation. The character's voice begins echoed in competition with the noise of a crowd, before descending into a dry, room-sized voice that erodes the crowd noise into silence. The queue's purpose is undefined - a transitional space of waiting with an indeterminate outcome. The stanchions serve as a symbolic guard between the character and the chaos provided by the refrain. However, like the refrain, the stanchion is only a suggested barrier. It is not hard to imagine ducking under or knocking over a stanchion, much in the same way it is not hard to imagine ceasing to refrain.

Following the completion of the refrain, the scene transitions from black and white to a colored image of the character's hands caressing a photograph - a memento of an experience. The photograph is the character from the queue, now seated in what seems to be an amusement ride. The image cross-fades and is converted into a three-dimensional scene depicted by the image with the apparatus now fully animated. The scene zooms in slowly to the new refrain: the motion refrain.

Through a constructed apparatus the motion refrain returns over and over to the same movement. It oscillates, loops, repeats, continues. The movement of the individual depends not on their autonomous action, but instead by the control they cede to the apparatus. The apparatus itself is designed as a hybrid between infant infrastructure and an amusement ride. The adult characters are seated in an infantilized location: in the front of a shopping cart, in a purple car seat, in a highchair, in a bassinet. Their adult bodies are shrunken into the larger structure of the apparatus. The infantilization of the characters is an externalization of the mental regression experienced within depersonalization and within refrain states. The infant element is attached to other industrialized elements (metal chains, crane with a motor, caster wheels, a spring) that are the drivers of locomotion. The combination yields an uncanny mechanism of the motion refrain, one whose depiction contrasts feelings of comfort vs. anxiety, rebirth vs. death, amusement vs. boredom, control vs. submission. The scene of the motion refrain is the refrain over-extended into submission. The motion refrain ceases to soothe and re-center but instead turns on its original purpose.

The work repeats the same structure of verbal refrain followed by motion refrain for each of the four characters before beginning again. In this way, *queue refrain* is itself is a nested, audio-visual refrain - a loopable work without demarcated beginning or end capable of producing an entrancing redundancy.

Video @ <https://billyfoshay.co/MFA-Thesis-2020>



queue refrain, 2020, single-channel video with sound (still)

hygienics against a noisy death, 2020. Video Installation.

hygienics against a noisy death is an in-progress video installation that situates an additional motion refrain apparatus in the gallery and serves as an extension of *queue refrain*. A set of stationary escalator stairs are installed for the viewer to ascend and stand on. From the top step, a monitor on an extended arm mount is viewable. One at a time participants stand on the stairs to view the video – a first-person perspective of a never-ending escalator ride.

The escalator is an additional site that externalizes symptoms of DPDR. It is a site of anxiety that cedes control to the apparatus. In the redundancy of an escalator, moments become exchangeable. The video extends this notion to its extreme by allowing the escalator to continue in perpetuity and by eliminating clues that typically provide context in a physical escalator (advertisements, other individuals, a destination). The virtual escalator is located in context-less black space giving little opportunity for a traveler to locate themselves. Like with the characters of *queue refrain*, the participant is transported not by their own autonomous action, but instead by the apparatus. While in *queue refrain* the viewer is an observer, in *hygienics against a noisy death* the viewer is a participant.

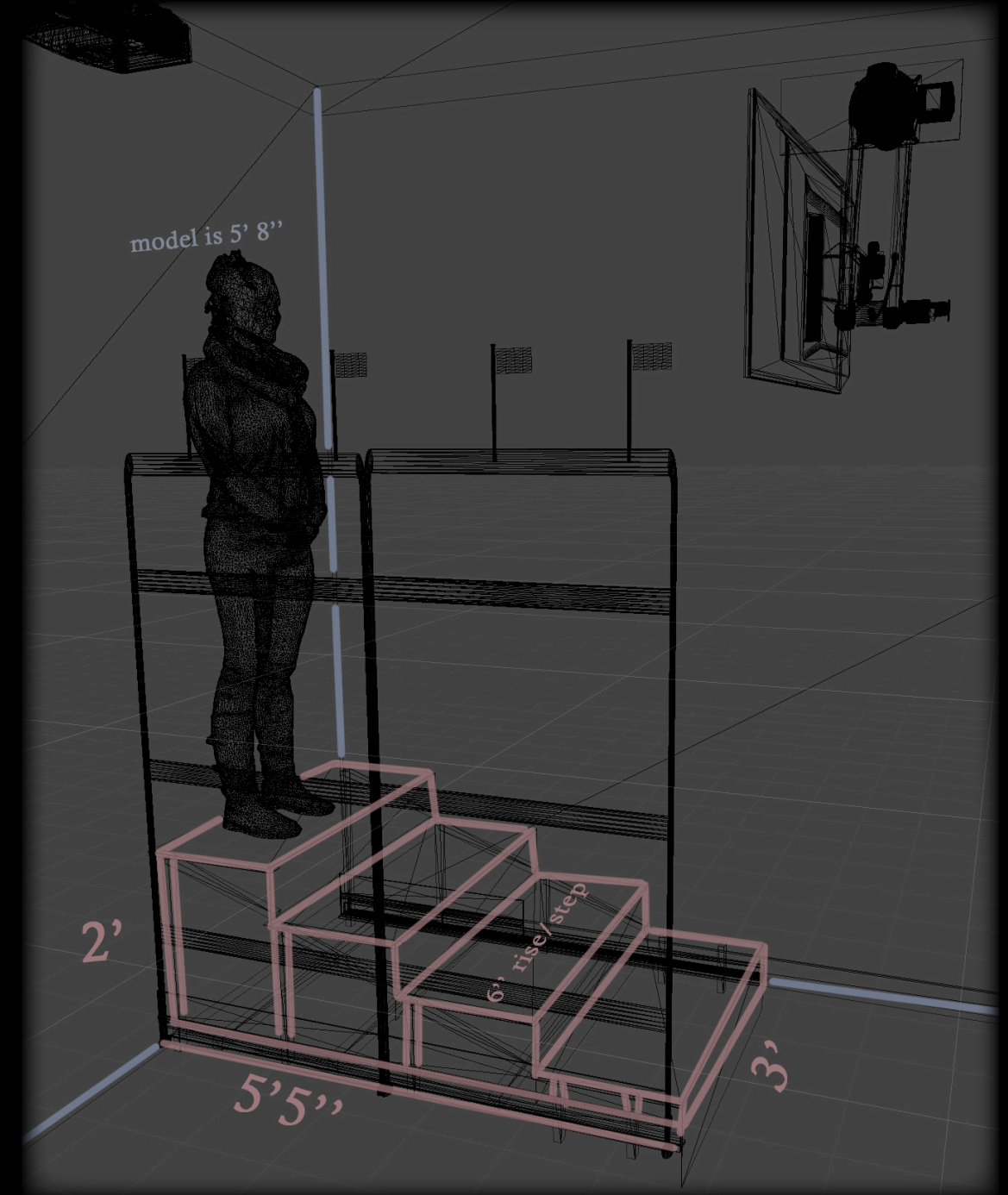
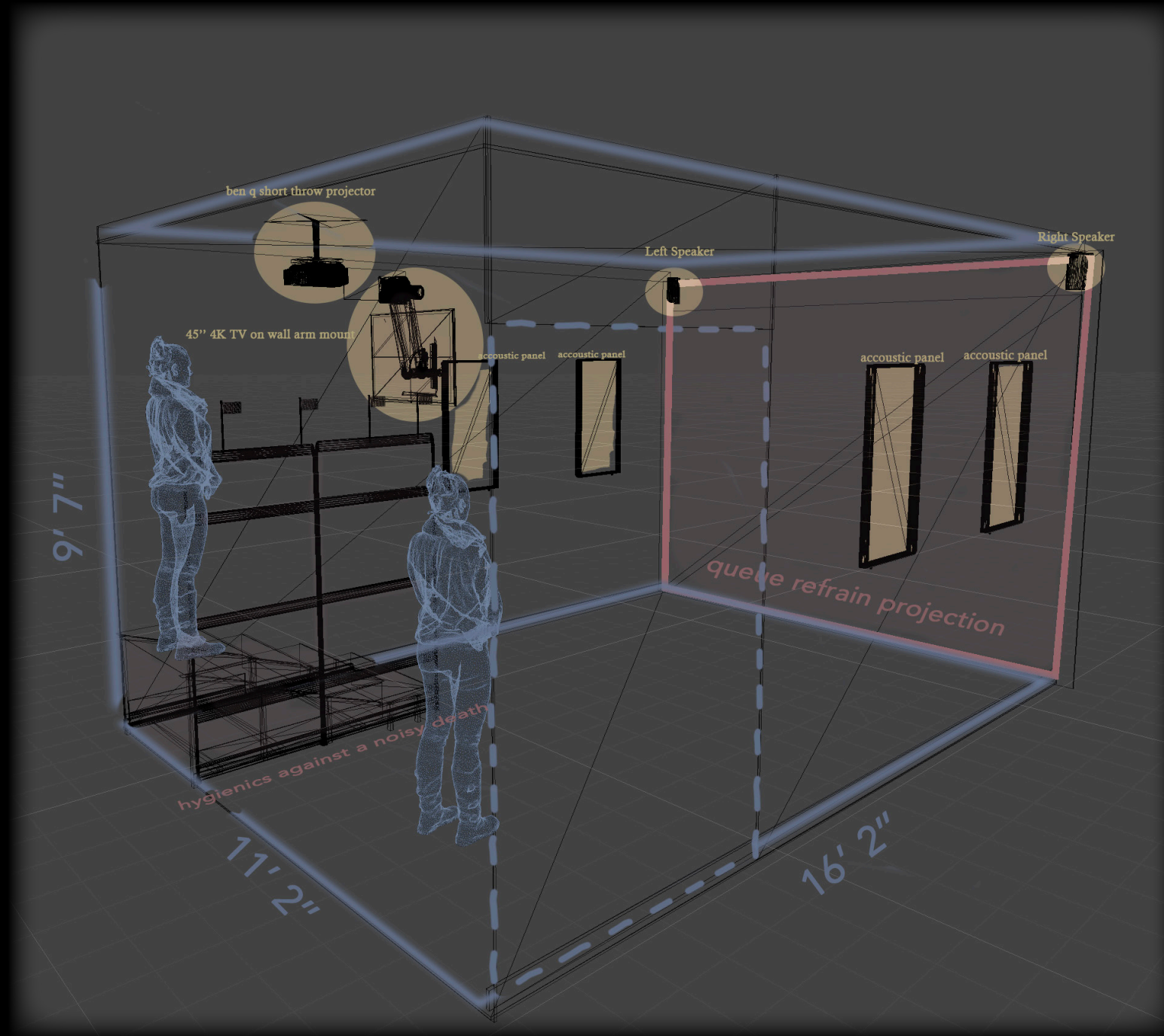
Because the stairs of the rendered video are mirrored by the physical escalator stairs in the gallery, a conversion is created between the digital and physical space. The point of view provided by the video is akin to the point of view the participants find themselves located in. These links heighten immersion and provide stepping stones for increased believability. The work requires the participant for its activation. Choices to leave the construction of the apparatus exposed is a nod to the awareness the depersonalized has toward their feelings of unreality. A viewer in the gallery sees the underbelly of the stairs, the arm mount that holds the screen, and that the stairs are not animated. Yet, when standing at the top step the viewer is entered into the moving escalator in a way that exceeds the parts of the apparatus. In the same manner, the depersonalized individual can conceptually understand their alienation is not true, and yet the affect continues despite it. "I know this is illusory and yet I cannot help but feel the way I do".

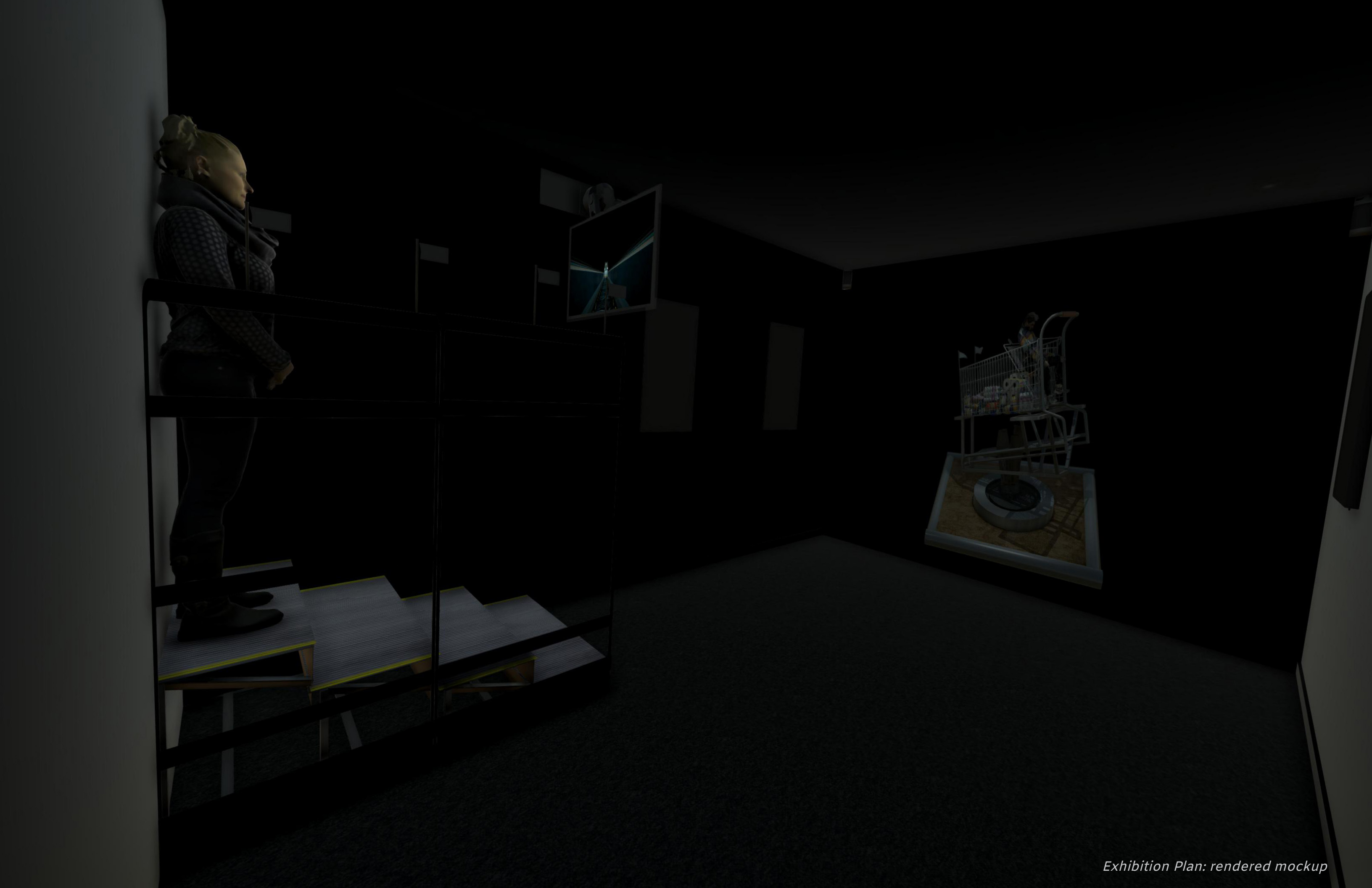


Mockup Documentation @ <https://billyfoshay.co/MFA-Thesis-2020>

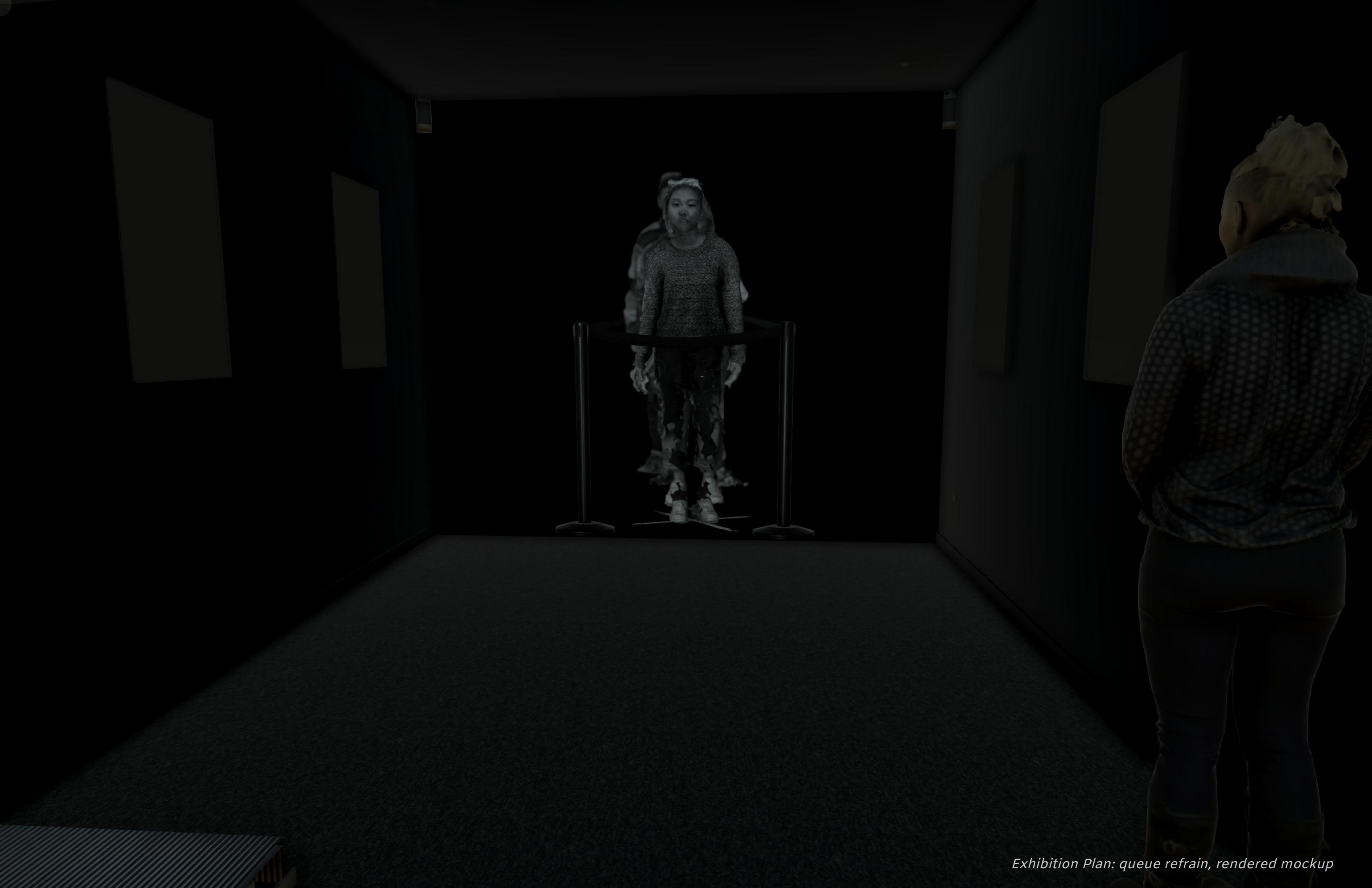
Installation Plan:

The two works will be installed in a 16' 2" x 11' 2" black box video room. *queue refrain* will be projected onto the entirety of the back wall, with stereo sound coming from the speakers located on the ceiling corners. *hygienics against a noisy death* will be installed in the front corner of the room. An extended arm TV mount will hold a 45" 4k monitor in front of four stationary escalator stairs. Viewers will experience *hygienics against a noisy death* one at a time from the top step.

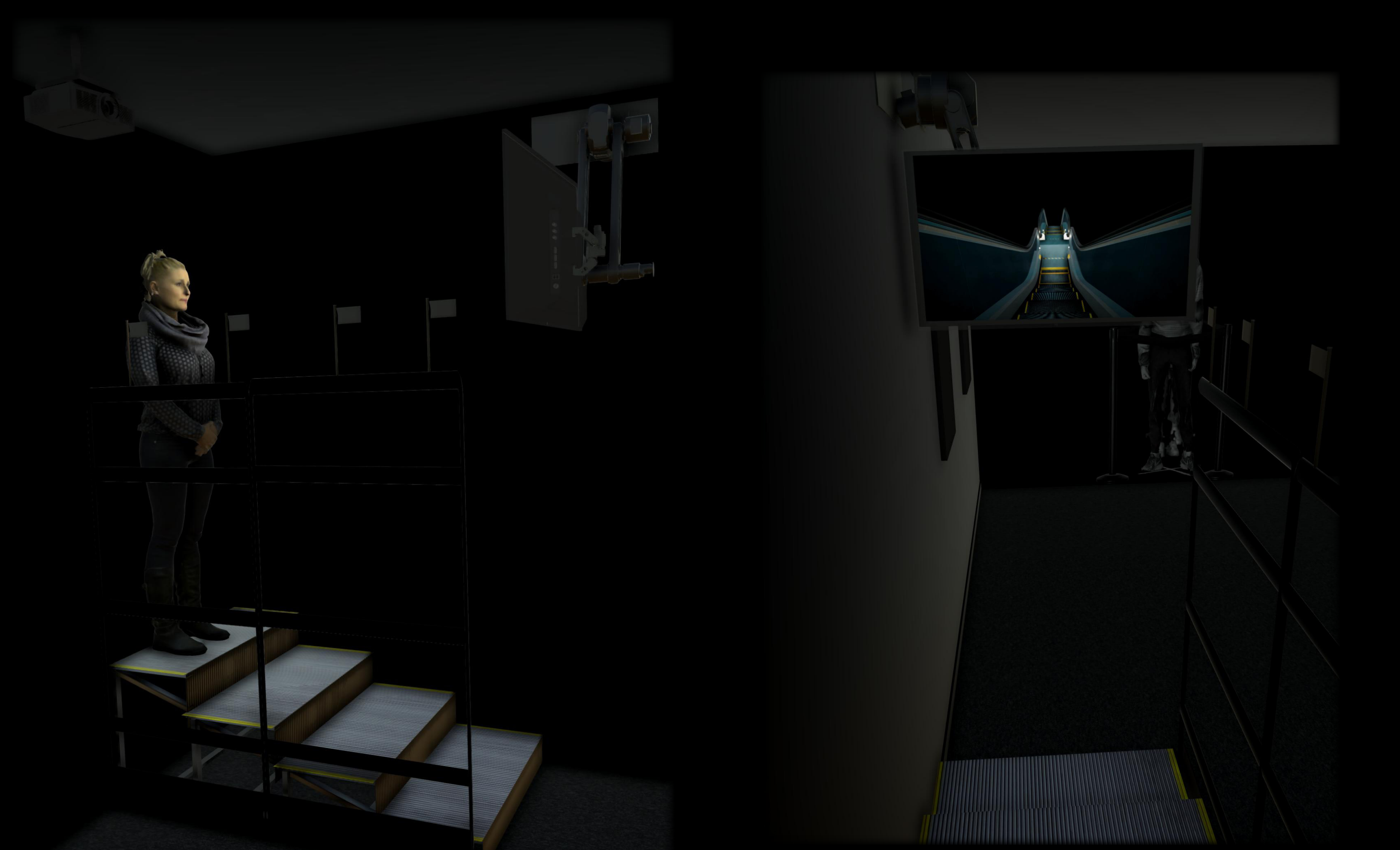




Exhibition Plan: rendered mockup



Exhibition Plan: queue refrain, rendered mockup



Exhibition Plan: hygienics against a noisy death rendered mockup

Selected Books:

The Machinic Unconscious, Essays in Schizanalysis - Felix Guattari
Chaosmosis – An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm – Felix Guattari
Futurability - Franco Berardi
The Soul at Work: from Alienation to Autonomy – Franco Berardi
Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide – Franco Berardi
Poetry and Breathing – Franco Berardi
No Sense of Place: the Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior - Joshua Meyrowitz
Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man - Marshall McLuhan
What is Philosophy? – Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari
Cinema I, The Movement Image - Gilles Deleuze
Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza – Gilles Deleuze
24/7 Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep – Johnathan Crary
Techniques of the Observer – Johnathan Crary
What Is an Apparatus?: and Other Essays – Giorgio Agamben
Blog Theory – Jodi Dean
The Transparency Society – Byung-Chul Han
Psycho-Politics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power – Byung Chul Han
Madness: the Invention of an Idea - Michel Foucault
Lacan at the Scene – Henry Bond
Fanged Noumena – Nick Land
Capitalist Realism – Mark Fisher
Acting Out - Bernard Stiegler
The World as Will and Representation – Arthur Schopenhauer
Beyond the Pleasure Principle – Sigmund Freud
Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas – Natasha Dow-Schull
The Ethics – Benedict de Spinoza
Char Davies’ Immersive Virtual Art and the Essence of Spatiality – Laurie McRobert
Overcoming Depersonalization and Feelings of Unreality – Elaine Hunter
The Unframed World, Virtual Reality as Artistic Medium – S. Himmelsbach
Pygmalion’s Spectacles – Stanley Weinbaum
Bruce Nauman A Contemporary – MOMA Ps1 Reader
The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death – Corrine Botz
Stranger to My Self: Inside Depersonalization: the Hidden Epidemic - Jeffery Abugel
A Seer Reader – Ed Atkins
The Age of Earthquakes: a Guide to the Extreme Present – Hans-Ulrich Obrist, et al.
Infinity. An Essay in Metaphysics – Jose Amado Benardete
Ed Atkins - Christov-Bakargiev, Carolyn, and Marianna Vecellio
The Days of Abandonment – Elena Ferrante
The Trial - Franz Kafka
Lost in the Cosmos: the Last Self-Help Book – Walker Percy
The Family Bed - Tine Thevenin

Selected Articles:

De-automization and the Mystic Experience – Arthur J Deikman
Charging Space: Virtual Reality as an Arena of Embodied Being – Char Davies
Osmose: Notes on Being in Immersive Virtual Space – Char Davies
Rethinking VR: Key Concepts and Concerns – Char Davies
Space: In Science, Art and Society – Char Davies
IMU VR Camera – Michael Naimark
Autonomic response in....depersonalization disorder – Sierra, David, Et al.
Emotional memory and perception of emotional.... depersonalization disorder – Montagne et al.
... parasympathetic responsesin depersonalization disorder – Owens, David, Et Al.
Emotional Experience and Awareness of Self...Depersonalization Disorder – Medford, Sierra, David Et al.
Chronic depersonalization following illicit drug use.... – Medford, Hunter, David, Et al.
Mindfulness and Body Awareness in Depersonalization Disorder – Nestler, Sierra, David Et Al.
Visual Imagery and Depersonalization – Lambert, Sierra, Hunter, David, Et al.
Depersonalization: A selective impairment of self-awareness – Sierra, David
new perspectives on perspective taking mechanisms – Jason Braithwaite
Deliberate and Spontaneous Sensations of Disembodiment: Capacity or Flaw – Jason Braithwaite
Out of Body Out of Mind? - Jason Braithwaite and Tony David
The Depersonalized Brain – Jason Braithwaite
The Interface Between Satre’s Theory of Emotions and Depersonalization/Derealization – Rena Kurs
Dissociation, Social Technology and the Spiritual Domain – Tanya Luhrmann
Communication and the Economy – Jodie Dean
Are We Already Living in Virtual Reality – Joshua Rothman
Considering Virtual Reality in Children’s Lives – Jakki O. Bailey & Jeremy N. Bailenson
10 Ethical Concerns That Will Shape the VR Industry – Fiona J McEnvoy
A New Form of Social Withdrawal in Japan: A Review of Hikikormori – Alan R. Teo, MD
Topology of Contemporary Art - Boris Groys
The Terror of Authenticity – Byung- Chul Han
The Mortification of Self – Harcourt
The Posthuman Body – Katherine Hayles
Listening to Cybernetics – Christina Dumbar-Hester
In Defense of the Poor Image – Hito Steyerl
What Psychoanalysis Can Tell Us About Cyberspace – Slavoj Zizek
Post Script on Societies of Control – Giles Deleuze

Selected Films:

Level 5 – Chris Marker
Sans Soleil – Chris Marker
Color Correction – Margaret Honda
Blood in My Milk - Marianna Simnett
Beside Manner – Corrinne Botz
Cries and Whispers – Ingmar Bergman
Persona – Ingmar Bergman
Nostalgia – Andrei Tarkovsky
Jeanne Dielman – Chantal Akerman
Trash Humpers – Harmony Korine
Videodrome - David Cronenberg
Irréversible - Gaspar Noé
I Stand Alone – Gaspar Noé
Beau Travail - Claire Denis

Noteworthy Exhibitions:

Is This Tomorrow? - White Chapel Gallery, London
World Receivers - Zebludowitz Collection, London
Art in the Age of the Internet - ICA Boston
Aloft, Laurie Anderson @ Mass MOCA

Noteworthy Lectures:

Franco Mattes @ MIT
Margaret Honda @ Harvard Film Archive
Hans Ulrich Obrist @ Harvard
Deleuze Annual Conference - WPI Boston
Jim Skult @ Boston University

appendix

additional selection of work:

queue refrain (stills), 2020.....pg. 12-21
grocery facing, 2019.....pg. 22-24
tape prints, 2020.....pg. 25-27
no laughing gas please, 2019.....pg. 28-30
pleasure points, 2020.....pg. 31-32
limbo, 2019.....pg. 33
rubber worm, 2019.....pg. 34
meat space head wrap, 2018.....pg. 35



queue refrain, 2020, single-channel video with sound (still)

门前大桥下游过一群鸭。

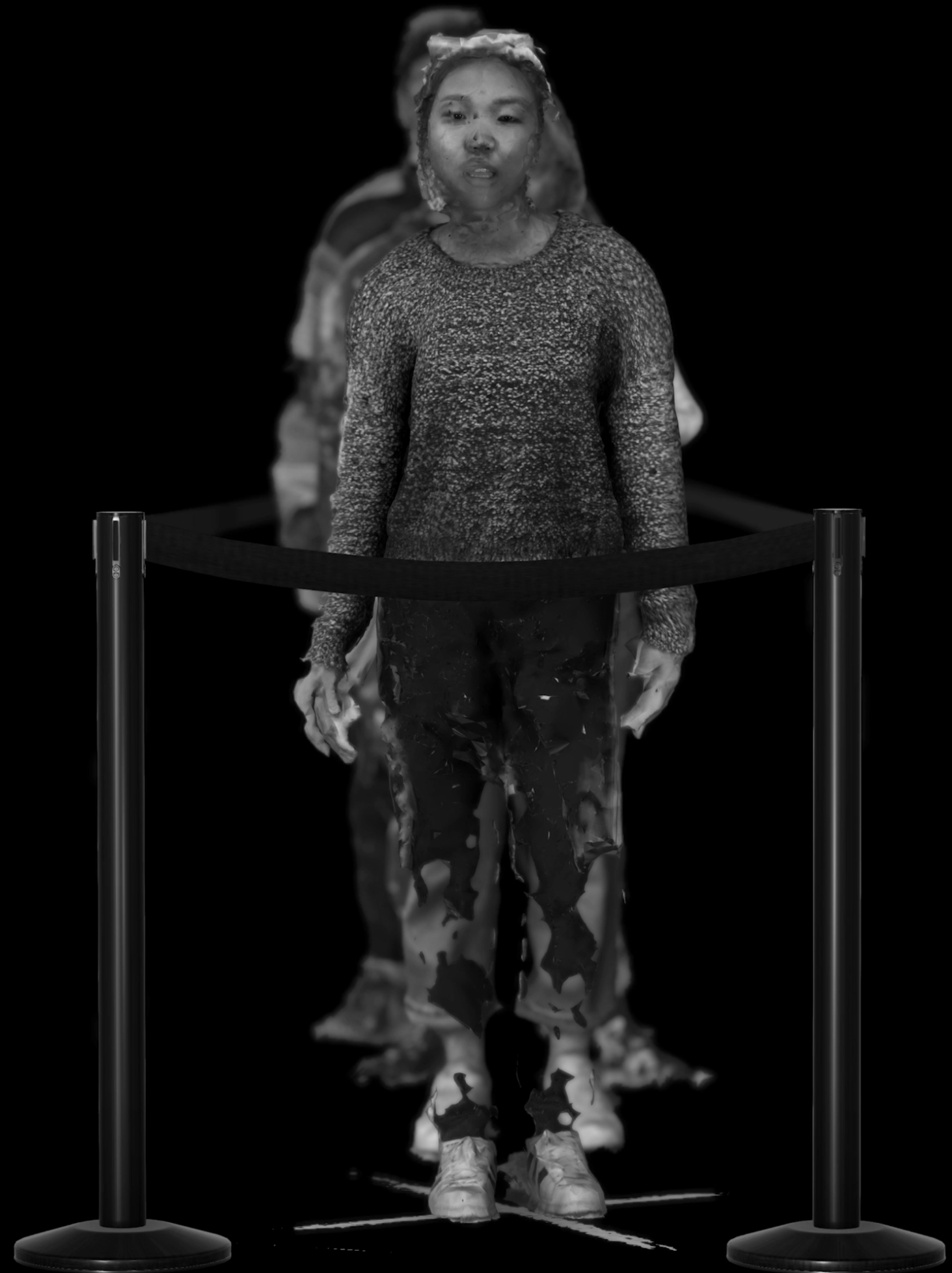
快来快来数一数 二四六七八。

嘎嘎 嘎嘎。

真呀真多呀

数不清到底多少鸭。

数不清到底多少鸭。





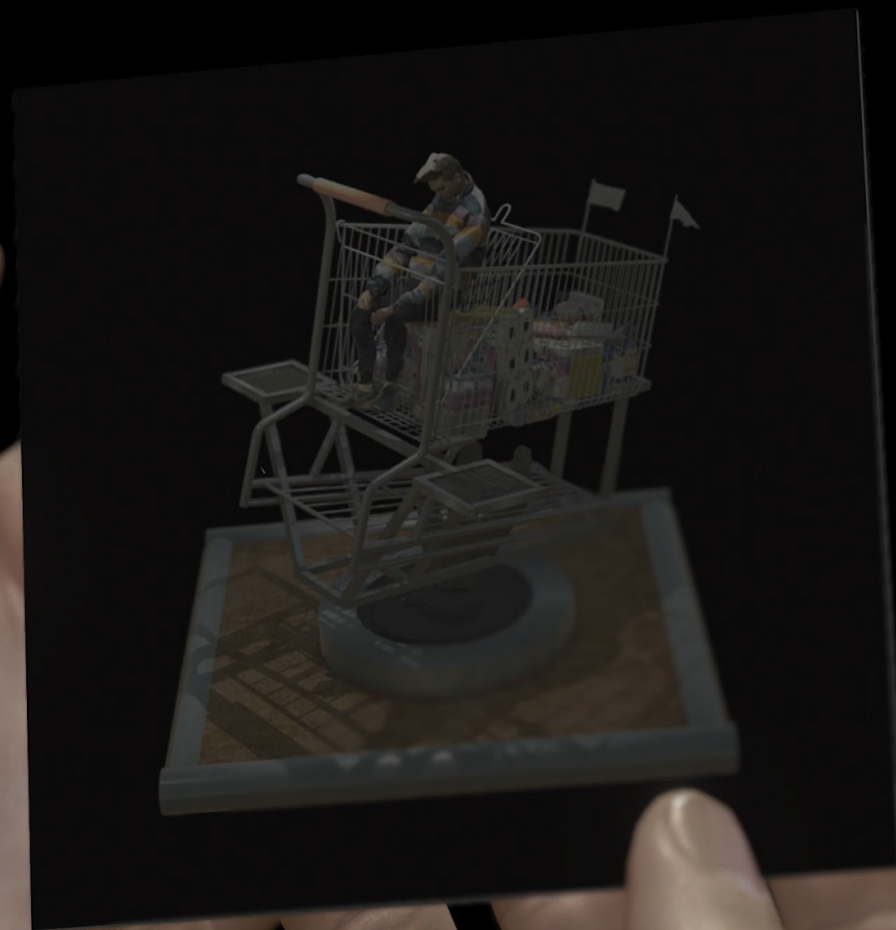
so often i pull myself away
may the words of my mouth restore
order to me.

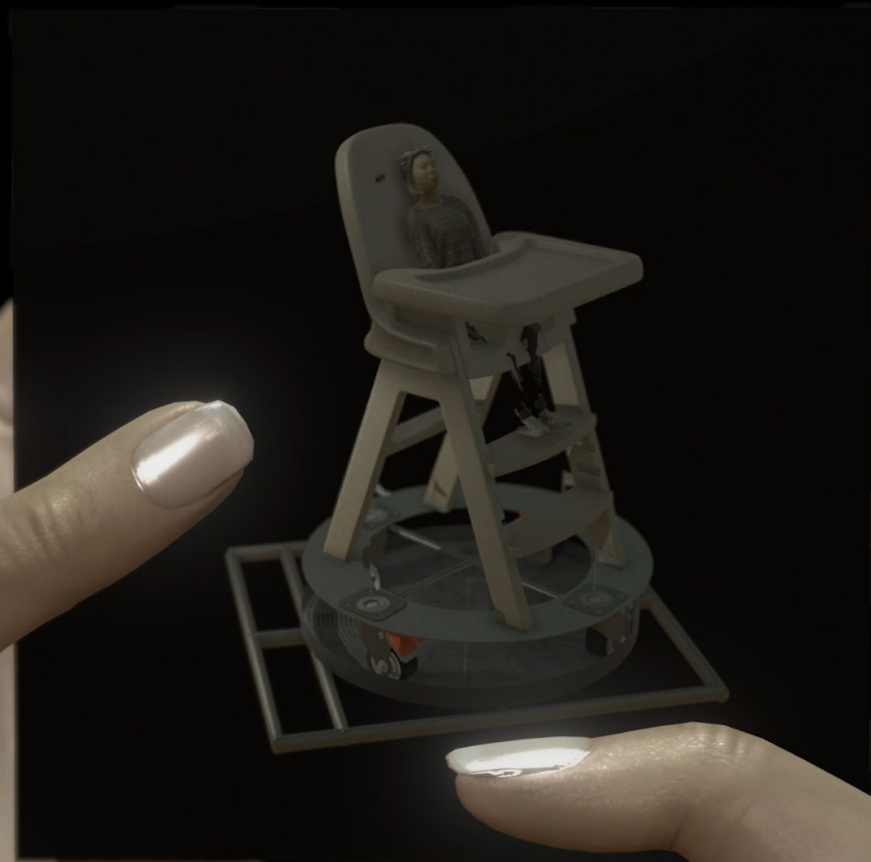
i have allowed my expressions to
escape
may the words of my mouth restore
order to me.

i see no end to my fingertips
may the words of my mouth
restore order to me.
i have elevated into affections
i can no longer recognize
may the words of my mouth
restore order to me x 2



queue refrain, 2020, single-channel video with sound (still)







queue refrain, 2020, single-channel video with sound (still)



queue refrain, 2020, single-channel video with sound (still)



queue refrain, 2020, single-channel video with sound (still)



queue refrain, 2020, single-channel video with sound (still)



grocery facing, 2019, single-channel video with sound 15 minutes, 33 seconds (installation view)

Video @ <https://billyfoshay.co/MFA-Thesis-2020>



grocery facing, 2019, single-channel video with sound (stills)





as monchichi as taxidermy, 2019, pigment print on masking tape. 58" x 77"

via a wet rhythm - a flat careful risk space. select meat is speed space. rhythm could be mimed is lost or gained - either way a growing inclination for "events" w/ less closure trinkets. remainders, and link zones self-selected ilinx is a joke - it can't be put on a rhythm schedule... sadly, in leui, it's lanes of ergonomic objects buttering prescripts together for the one space softly beveled with lavender aroma difusers. people show up well aware the engagement cuts the plot robs non-discrete accommodation, relieves a need to declare anything at all. muteness is preferable to outright booring.

I played with the balance of stimulants and their cessation,
i got caught in the right staring spell on a leash,
i got off in micro-spasms,
i ran everywhere,

blood lets and sweat sets risk the rule s. push techniques are developed long-division remainders typically disclosed are run through the object of another wirl - funny statuses secret and become the premiere accounted quantity

to a fitted stone body cast in center of anamtrak aisle - the child obliges from its seat:
"a tree a house a tree a tree me a tree a line a line a tree a tree a tree"

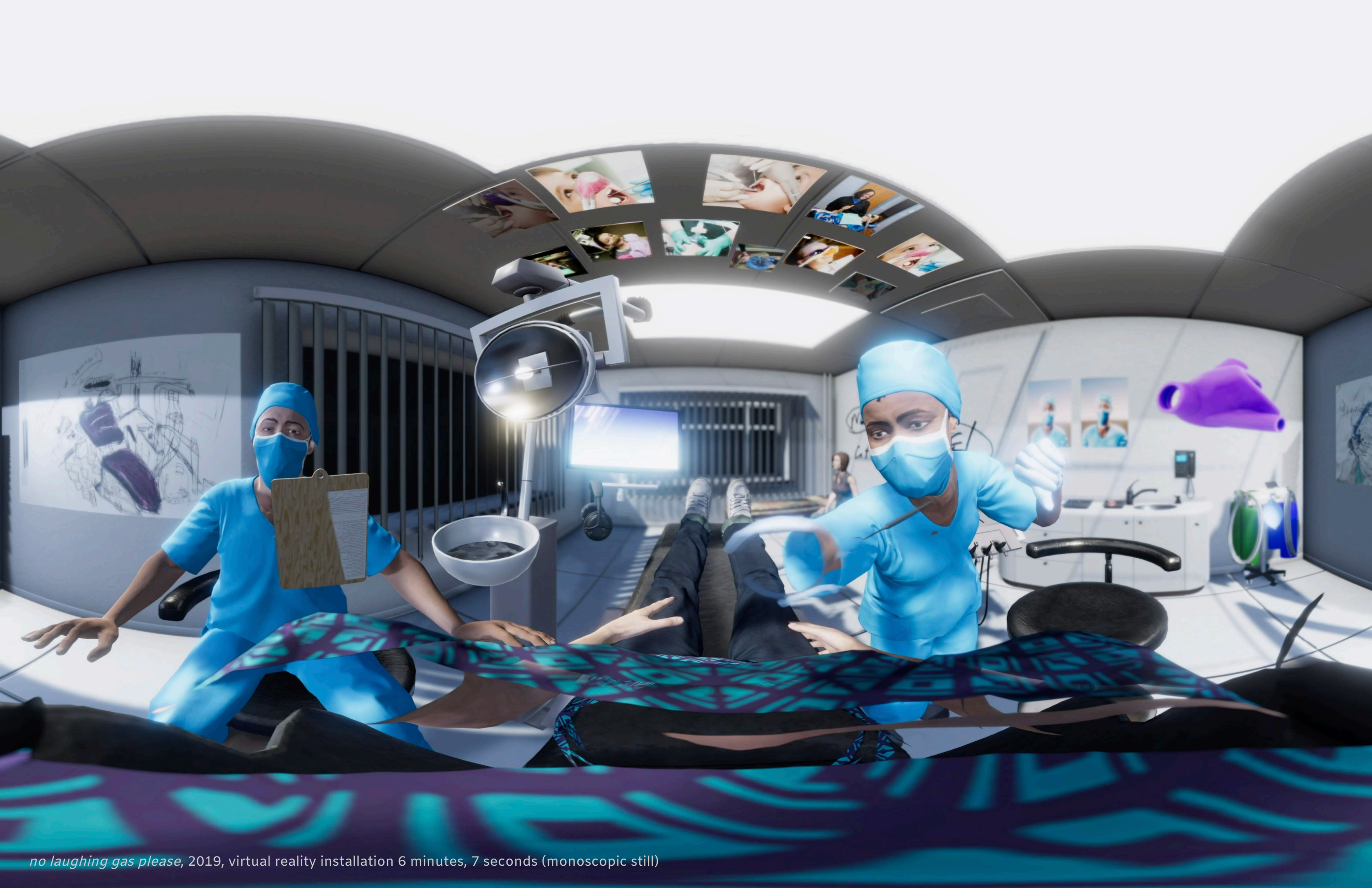


immediate object, 2020, pigment print on masking tape, 77" x 58"



no laughing gas please, 2019, virtual reality installation

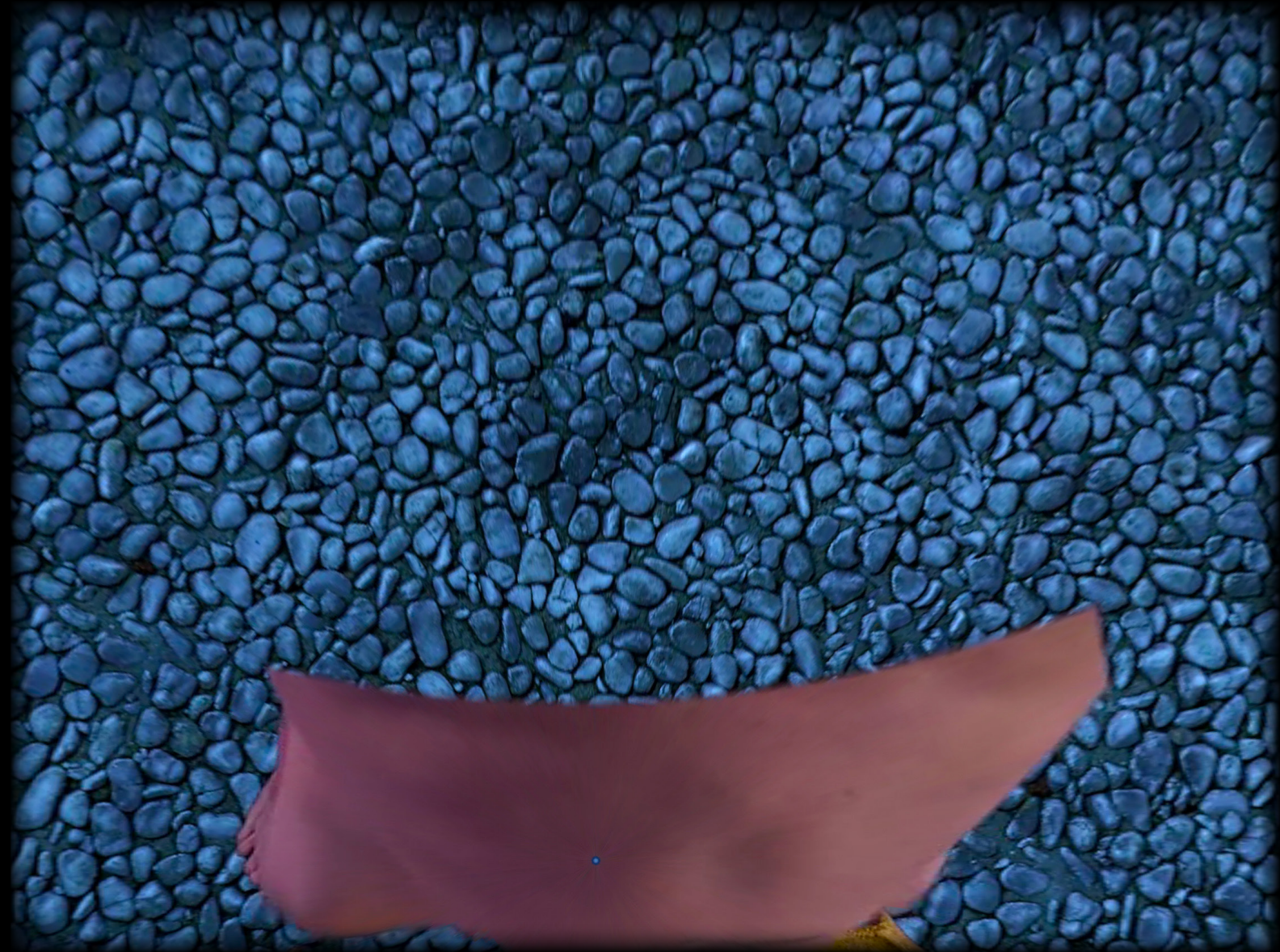
Video @ <https://billyfoshay.co/MFA-Thesis-2020>



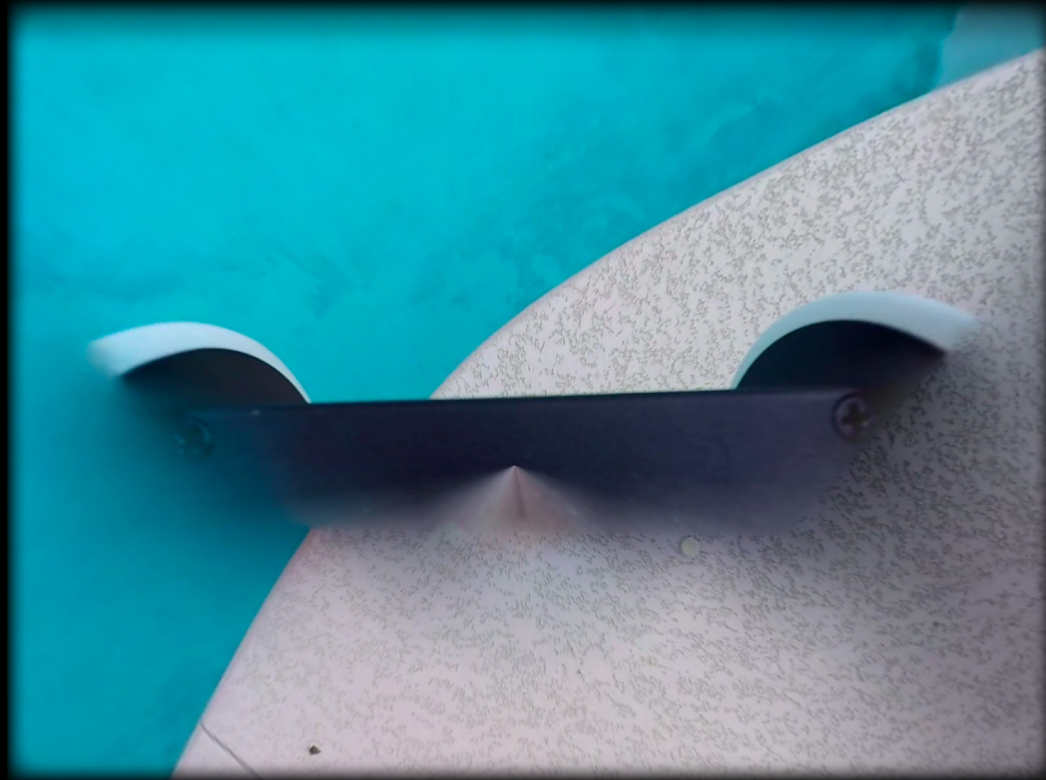
no laughing gas please, 2019, virtual reality installation 6 minutes, 7 seconds (monoscopic still)

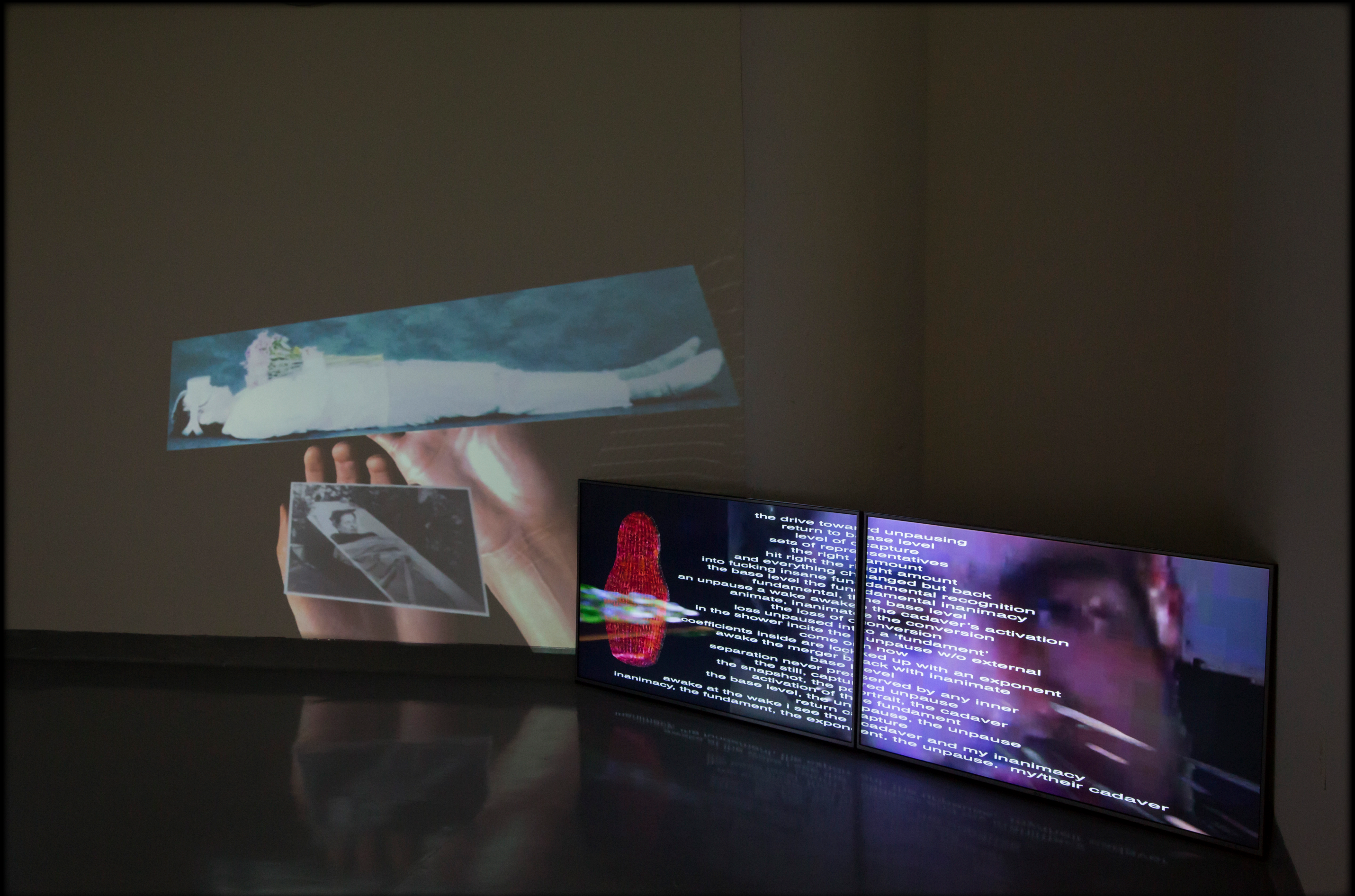


no laughing gas please, 2019, virtual reality installation.



pleasure points, 2020, stills from vr pornography





limbo, 2019, three-channel video with sound 15 minutes, 17 seconds (installation view)



rubber worm, 2019, single-channel video (still)



meat space head wrap, 2018, photosculpture in water

