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# Where do we go from here?

James M. O'Donnell

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WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

by

JAMES O'DONNELL

Under the Direction of Craig Dongoski

ABSTRACT

*Where do we go from here?* is a video installation by Atlanta-based artist James O'Donnell that attempts to provoke others into similar contemplation of that existential question through an immersive video and audio installation exploring the self through references to the internal and external; past and future; and connection and disconnection.

INDEX WORDS: Art, Artist, Video, Installation, Cumberland Island, Ocean, Beach, Existential

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

by

JAMES O'DONNELL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012



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2012

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

by

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May 2012

**DEDICATION**

*For Ann and Evelyn.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The shimmering pink crests of waves, interrupted with dark hills, appear on the horizon and disappear beneath me while the sky steadily grows aflame, until finally bursting with the magnificent rays of the rising magenta sun scattering the cloudbanks. I am sitting in a plain wooden chair just beyond the breaking waves where water rushes towards my naked feet and plays between my toes. All the universe lies before me.

Where do I go from here?

My hope is to provoke others into similar contemplation of that existential question through an immersive video and audio installation exploring the self through references to the internal and external; past and future; and connection and disconnection.

## 2. WHERE DID I COME FROM?

Sitting just beyond the crashing waves, I am engrossed in the natural splendor before me and my mind stills. I do not worry about where I have come from or where I am going. I am here. When I was a child, the sun would brighten and dim as I dug in the sands and splashed in the waves of the Florida beaches I knew as home. The outside world could not encroach on me, inaudible over the shushing sound of the tide. Now, my intractable mind chatters away incessantly like a hyperactive toddler, ceaselessly exploring every nook and cranny of my thoughts. It is anxious to make sense of what has happened and to get ahead of what is coming. Peace seems fleeting if not entirely impossible.

My art was spawned on a handful of small crimson islands adrift on a tussled white cotton sea. I remember staring at the fresh red stains on my crumpled sheets; my mattress and bedding tossed about the room – the aftermath of a struggle. I fixed my eyes on the small spots through blurry vision while my racing mind replayed the cracking of the door frame, the strike of a fist, and the stink of alcohol on breath that punctuated the end of my resistance. My teenage blood boiled like the frenzied water escaping exposed lava deep beneath the waves. Rage consumed me. I wanted to destroy him. I wanted to destroy myself. I wanted the world to burn. I ran out into the night desperate for a way to release my pain – to do something terrible – but there was no place to go. After a few hours, I went home.

I retreated to my sketchbook and colored pencils and began drawing. I created. Just a trickle at first, my emotions soon spilled out onto the blank pages, eventually becoming a deluge. It was unlike anything I had felt before. One such drawing depicted a girl prostrate on the ground, obscured by dark shadows and face hidden, with hair dissolving into an illuminated rainbow pool – beauty can come from tragedy. In the act of making, a process of healing was initiated which continues to this day. Art saved me from oblivion.

I spent most of my childhood on islands and I have returned to an island – escaping in search of something. I will call this something my self – even though I’m not sure what that is. The questions of “Who am I?” or “What am I like?” are familiar territories for artists and philosophers. At times we attempt to distill our essences to single prominent features, such as our minds, bodies, intellects, souls, memories, various combinations or none at all. At other times, we identify with struggle or paradox, citing good versus bad, order versus chaos, rational versus irrational. In *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, philosopher Søren Kierkegaard ponders this, explor-

ing how the self can be fragmented and paradoxical, as the book is a collection of writings by two anonymous but philosophically opposed authors, while also a unified, distinct whole, as the works of both authors are brought together under the verisimilitude of an editor who claims that the writings were discovered inside a hidden drawer in a writing desk. Kierkegaard, or rather “The Editor,” explicitly says that much early on, stating “During my constant occupation with these papers it dawned on me that they could yield a new aspect if regarded as the work of one man.”<sup>1</sup> He poses the choice of “either/or” in the title but clearly desires that the reader consider that the answer is actually both.

Perhaps I feel divided. So I search for that “new aspect” of the self that is not readily available during my daily life; not immediately accessible amidst my normal surroundings. This self I feel has been long absent in my life – at the very least dormant – if I ever knew it to begin with. But there is definitely longing within. Longing for peace, quiet, and connection. Each day of my life is lived so much in the past or so far in future. I seem to remember existing once in the present, but that memory seems as distant as a tiny speck of land in the middle of the sea. In many ways, we must separate from others in our attempts to know ourselves. Philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin proposed transgression, a term he coined to refer to the fundamental difference between the way we view ourselves and the way we view others. Namely, we experience ourselves as extratemporal, meaning existing in relation to the past and future. We never see ourselves in totality. Instead, reality rolls out from our headless bodies. That differs from how we see others, primarily as objects placed in time existing in gestalt. He lauds Romanticism, stating that it is within such work that one may “Observe an ‘oxymoronic’ construction of imag-

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, 35.

es or figures: the contradiction between the inner and outer, between social status and essence, between infinitude of content and finitude of embodiment, is forcefully accentuated.”<sup>2</sup>

To know what we are we must know what we are not – we disconnect to connect.

My first connection to fine art that I recall was a small reproduction of a Romantic painting by Abbott Handerson Thayer entitled *Winged Figure* (1889) (Figure 1). The painting depicts a female angel, a symbol of virtue, reclining slightly in her seat of clouds with her eyes closed and her hand clutching her breast. From the look on her face, one could assume that the figure is at peace, possibly dreaming. But if so, why was she clutching her chest? With its tinge of dark teal and blue, the sky surrounding her seems to hint ever slightly at an ominous quality. Is she having a nightmare, and if so, what dreams could torture an angel? With her brown hair pulled back into a bun, she reminded me of my mother. I empathized with the figure but I could not reconcile the two aspects and the image has never left my mind. Upon researching the image years later, I was alerted to the fact that, despite rendering his angels with great skill and care, Thayer would paint with unusual tools and media, mixing dirt into his palette and applying pigment with a broom. Even in materials and execution there was a paradox.

Later, I gravitated towards artists that used art to deal with trauma like myself. The earliest example is the work of Edvard Munch. His haunted images spoke to me. Specifically, in *Madonna* (1895 – 1902) the female figure emerges from the Carravagian darkness, appearing as a macabre spectre or seductive vampire (Figure 2). One assumes she is the embodiment of Munch’s feelings towards women, consistent with his body of work, as his depictions of women often share similar diabolical or sickly qualities. I could relate, having my own conflicted rela-

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<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, 10.

tionship with my mother. The rawness and honesty of emotion evident was in sharp contrast to more idyllic representations of women with which I was already familiar, such as Thayer's. Munch's inclusion of the mummified fetus seemed to signify death, while the sperm circulating through the illustrated frame seemed to reference sexuality, or perhaps an unfulfilled life. While Munch was still young, he lost both his mother and a younger sister to disease, afterwards being raised primarily by his father. Munch states that, "My father was temperamentally nervous and obsessively religious—to the point of psychoneurosis. From him I inherited the seeds of madness. The angels of fear, sorrow, and death stood by my side since the day I was born."<sup>3</sup> We both had witnessed the decaying bodies and of our loved ones and the dark side of life.

Eventually in college I was exposed to the sculptural installations of Mike Kelley, a fellow child of Catholicism who also seemed interested in trauma. I had the good fortune to see his work first-hand when I visited the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City and encountered *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987) (Figure 3). Kelley stitches together a number of discarded stuffed animals, many hand-made in appearance, and blanket fragments to create a large rectangle on the wall. While it could reference a painting, specifically abstract expressionist, it could also reference a tapestry, enhancing the notion of time (as in a narrative tapestry) or as something symbolic like a flag or a banner. The motley, dysfunctional quality of the stitching resembles some kind of tumor or growth, maybe a sutured wound, or simply chaos, due to its disorderly and uneven appearance. Was as much thought given to aesthetics as was given to the once-loved belongings? Bunches of maze adorn the two corners holding up

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<sup>3</sup> Prideaux, *Edvard Munch*, 2.



the shroud, possibly referencing Thanksgiving, a family event and ritualizes giving of thanks. But here, appreciation is never satisfying as suggested by the title. A child does not appreciate their parents or their toys. Love goes unreciprocated. Using spoiled toys points to a loss of innocence and perhaps childhood trauma. A viewer could find oneself empathizing with the abandoned things. It was simple gesture with a familiar object and yet its open-endedness prompts innumerable interpretations and associations. It was uninhibited in its rawness and authenticity, exhibiting both shame and vulnerability.

Prior to graduate school, I worked almost exclusively in mixed media drawing, collaging together images of birds with text and string. The text would often alert the viewer to my desire to communicate while the layering would often frustrate this, leaving the meaning ambiguous to viewers. Birds were favorite symbolic signifiers of mine for their range of meanings. I continued this practice into graduate school, relying on similar conventions of disguising myself through symbols, such as in *Need* (2009) (Figure 4). Due to the end of a long-term relationship, I began to reflect on how this work, camouflaging my emotions as it did, failed to relate the deeply personal feelings with which I was wrestling. Instead of birds, I tried a different animal in *Inner-child* (2010) (Figure 5). I tried images of myself in *I - S - T - L - N - E* (2010) (Figure 6). I tried extending into the viewer's space in *Doesn't Fall Far* (2010) (Figure 7). There was increasing intensity but they still lacked vulnerability. However it was through this work that I realized that I had spent half my life hiding from my past and my feelings. I was ready to confront them.

I found the vulnerability I was looking for in the work of performance artist Marina Abramovic. Many of her pieces involve the completion of deceptively simple actions or objectives, often to the point of exhaustion. Nevertheless, these elegant gestures are loaded with

layers of significance. Often sacrificing her body in search of truth, the artist repeatedly runs towards pain and discomfort whereas most try to avoid them. For example, in the piece *Rhythm 0* (1974), Abramovic exposed her body to the audience and invited them to interact with her using whatever object they wished from a wide assortment laid out on a table, ranging from flowers to a loaded pistol (Figure 8). Despite being stripped of her clothing and her life being in danger, she did not surrender. Her bravery was unquestionable and her commitment was awe-inspiring. I wanted to emulate that urgency. I also began to expose myself, my life and my body directly to audiences.

### 3. WHO AM I?

*Dialogue with Dad* (2011) is a short performance where I attempt to tell my thoughts about my father, who worked in professional sports, despite being drowned out by the constant thumping of a basketball loudly bouncing in a large-scale video projection behind me (Figure 9). This investigation continues in the video *Whistle* (2011), where I blow a metal whistle as hard as I can for as long as I can (Figure 10). The duration is ten minutes. The sound of a whistle demands attention, however this function is frustrated by the muting of the volume, leaving only my effort and eventual exhaustion on display. As if participating in confession, I expose secrets in my art. I remember visiting the confessional as a child and being overwhelmed by the dark solemnity and invisible power which occupied it. My work is deeply connected to my spiritual upbringing, having attended Christian schools throughout most of my life. In the pursuit of salvation, art and religion share many parallels.

While I was being raised in faith, I was also being raised alone by my mother who suffered from schizophrenia. Together, we inhabited a fantasy world which existed only in her sick mind and my imagination. It could only last so long. One day the illusion was shattered. Realizing that most everything you “know” is actually false is a traumatic experience – but it is one that feeds my interests in narrative, personal mythology, the construction of meaning, and the search for truth. The emotional intensity of my relationship with my mother produced *Love Letters to the Sea* (2010) a forty-five minute multi-media performance weaving together my experience of nearly drowning in the ocean as a child with the discovery and reading of several of my mother’s journals during adulthood, more than a decade after her death, some of which were written during pregnancy and others at the peak of her psychosis (Figure 11).

In 1997, cancer would take my mother’s life as I sat by her bedside. What was there one moment was gone the next. I was seventeen. In the video *More than our hearts can hold* (2010), paper bags lit from within by small flames glide across the glassy surface of a lake at night until dramatically bursting into flame, leaving only fading embers behind to disappear in the darkness (Figure 12). This work references both mourning as well as a physical and spiritual progression through time. From religion I borrow a reliance on metaphor and symbolism. This practice aims to make the unknowable, in my case my internal state, knowable to others while providing me with great self-awareness. In Catholicism, it is believed that God cannot be known directly. Instead, practitioners attempt to know God through the material world – objects – the evidence of creation. Meaning is ascribed to natural phenomenon, such as the appearance of a rainbow taken to represent the intentions of an invisible deity. Abstract ideas not easily communicated through words are made concrete through simple forms, such as the

depiction of the Holy Spirit as a dove or Jesus Christ as a lamb. All of the rich complexity of these subjects is distilled into a single representation, readily understandable to the layperson, yet loaded with layers of associations and significance. The strength of such imagery is its familiarity but it is also interesting that the open-ended nature of such common symbols means that total ownership over their meanings can never be achieved, which can lend itself to multiple interpretations or even confusion. For example, a lamb can dually stand for innocence as well as naivety. Similarly, such potent imagery acts as points of entry into my work and serves as possible portals into not only my own inner-workings, but the deeper truths of existence in which I am interested.

Mortality is a reoccurring theme in my work, often accessed through the examination of memory, specifically remembering and forgetting. This is especially true of my installation *Long As We Carry Them* (2010), which was a breakthrough piece in that it was the first time I was able to control an entire space (Figure 13). Given the opportunity of a solo exhibition, I began with questions. How do we let go? What holds us in place? What do we choose to hold onto? Representing a meditation on remembering and forgetting, I created a kind of confessional, inspired by the nocturnal paintings of Georges de la Tour, specifically his *Repenting Magdalene* (1630) (Figure 14). All of the objects in the installation reference this painting and serve the similar purpose of invoking reflection upon spirituality, vanity, and mortality. Confession and memory seems dependent upon social exchange. In order to exorcise our sins or shed the burden of secrets it seems necessary for one to confide in another, such as in therapy. Trust is offered in exchange for forgiveness. Likewise, our finite life-spans and shorter memories dictate

that our experiences must be passed on by future generations if those lessons are to survive. We trust in those we will never know.

In the installation, the viewer steps into an otherworldly, perhaps sacred space filled only by the warm glow of a single candle (Figure 15). Within this intimate space, the viewer encounters the secrets and memories of strangers written inside two books. In one they are invited to add their own. In another they are asked to replace a secret with one. Across from each book is a mirror, one reflecting the viewer and the other erasing (as it is a video loop of the table sans the viewer). In this way, the viewer helps others remember and forget, in the hope that unknown others will do the same for them. For the first time, I believed that I had succeeded in creating a unique environment in which the viewer played an active role that also reflected my own intensity and preoccupation with existential questions.

Continuing in a similar vein, a recent performative installation, *Eternity & Grandma's Fridge* (2011), was based on my recent discovery of a deceased relative whom was previously unknown to me and existed primarily in my grandmother's failing mind (Figure 16). As the underlying metaphor for the contemplation of my own existence and immortality, I utilized a refrigerator, a vessel much like our minds where we attempt to preserve things. I filled it with water and placed into it clay which slowly dissolved, referencing entropy, memory, and the familiar eulogy of ashes to ashes. Lying on its side, the refrigerator resembled a sarcophagus, hinting at the Egyptian obsession with the afterlife. My grandmother passed five months later. My artistic practice is driven by the need for reflection, healing, and a desire for a connection to a family history before it's gone.

#### 4. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Blood is thicker than water, but water connects us all even when blood fails. Water is vital to our existence and is similarly a fundamental element in my work. It can represent life, death, renewal, love, fear, consciousness, and the sublime. It can both feed and take away. Graduate school is a time of substantial shifting and so the beach seemed like a natural place to explore for my video installation *Where do we go from here?* (2012) (Figure 17). In the transcendentalist tradition of communing with nature in solitude to gain great personal insight and spiritual healing, I spent a week camping alone on an island with only my video equipment and a single book, Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea*, a transcendentalist work extolling the virtues of solitude, simplicity, and spiritual healing. She begins the book stating, "The Beach is not the place to work; to read, write or think."<sup>4</sup> I find the beach to be a place of transition – where waves meet sand and two worlds intermingle; constantly in flux like us. There one can lose oneself and find oneself like a shell in the tide. Approaching the end of graduate school, the question "Where do we go from here?" is ever-present. One cannot know what the future holds and whether one is contemplating the end of school, the end of a relationship, or the end of a life, the question remains the same. It is both personal and universal, but somewhere in between is something amazing, where our endings are also beginnings.

The first contact with the installation is from a distance, when the viewer perceives a low rumbling sound emanating nearby. The repetitive lull grows gradually louder with each step. As one approaches the entrance to the space, an image of a headless body sitting in a chair at the seashore confronts the viewer. It is framed cinematically by the doorway leading

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<sup>4</sup> Lindbergh, *Gift from the Sea*, 15.

into the large room. Inside it is dark, illuminated only by the video projections filling the walls. The only visible text is the question “Where do we go from here?” The space seems ominous but nevertheless the viewer is compelled by curiosity.

Upon entering the installation, the viewer is bombarded with the roaring sound originating from the left and the right mirrored by enormous projections of churning water (Figure 18). The sound is physical, reverberating through the body. Throughout the installation the frenzied water is constantly in the viewer’s periphery. This competes with the rhythmic lapping of the tide associated with the uncanny headless body in the pastoral scene directly ahead (Figure 19). It appears on a central wall that visually divides the gallery in half. The decapitated body shows signs of life, shifting occasionally in its seat. It ‘stares’ out over the ocean as the sun rises (or sets?) on the horizon. Eventually, the observant viewer becomes aware that there is something off and notices that the waves, rather than heading towards the viewer, are actually pulling away. Time is reversed. It may be noticed that the imagery of raging water has been slowed along with its sound, combined with the manipulation of a barely recognizable but familiar boat engine.

The removal of one’s own head is not a neutral gesture. In this abject state, is the body a reference for the erasure of intellect or the loss of identity? It may suggest that the way to find peace is to escape one’s head. Perhaps it is the embodiment of transgression? The figure is dressed in white. Is this institutional clothing associated with madness? Pajamas indicating a dream? Or possibly a baptismal garb referencing purity? How do these references alter the symbolic properties of the frenzied water surrounding the viewer?

Is it ironic that the headless body would logically be unable to enjoy the grandeur of one of the most romanticized natural phenomenon in the world, the break of dawn? Of course, the dawn is often taken to represent a beginning. Alternatively, can the body be considered a foil, standing in for the end? This line of thought leads one to believe that the body might be associated with the present, while the reversed waves might symbolize the past with the sun referencing the future. A trinity. Additionally, religious epiphany is often ascribed metaphorically to daybreak. Could this be an awakening of faith?

However, if the viewer perceives a sunset instead, is this relationship reversed? If so, the sunset would typically be associated with the end. Is the backwards tide pulling the body towards finality? Does it signify that the headless body is approaching the end of its vitality? Does headless represent the loss of one's mind and the end of anxiety or the forgetting that occurs in the twilight of age?

The image seems to reference Romantic painting, such as *The Monk by the Sea* (1808 - 10) by Caspar David Friedrich, which depicts a tiny figure in monk's robes standing on a cliff in the foreground dwarfed by the natural splendor of an enormous seascape (Figure 20). Is this video a similar encounter with the sublime? At this point, the viewer may become alert to the possibility of other art historical references in the other videos as well. For example, could the tumultuous water flanking the viewer, almost abstracted in its massive scale, reference abstract expressionism?

Passage into the second half of the space behind the central wall reveals a new dialogue (Figure 21). A television set sits on the floor against the far wall. Here the viewer discovers the missing head. Is it a portrait of the artist? One has to travel the farthest distance to



view it closely. It contains the image of a head mouthing inaudible words while the tide occasionally fills the screen, temporarily submerging the head in the incoming tide (Figure 22). The television is also the heaviest, most concrete object in the space. The head gazes out towards the viewer but is buffered from connecting by the media. The television stares directly at a small video display across the room on the central wall, with an intermittent crackling sound additionally drawing attention.

The video depicts a figure laying on the ground and facing away from the viewer amidst a sandstorm (Figure 23). Intimate viewing provides the closest respite from the projections of water on the other side as, even though they are still easily heard, they are no longer in sight. Instead, one hears mainly the sound of wind. The figure endlessly phases in and out of view, disappearing into the sand. The figure is again dressed in white and still has a hidden identity with his face concealed. Is this a new beginning as well? Another ending? References to mortality or consciousness perhaps, these videos seem to allude to the vulnerability of the body or the self as they are exposed, even succumbing, to the elements.

These videos are small and intimate, serving to draw the viewer into communion with each piece, whereas the large wall projections absorb the viewer, even allowing their shadows to enter the imagery. While all the other videos are flat and bound to the wall and function as windows or gateways, the television is a vessel. Why is this one closed and contained? Trapped as it may be, if the head is a representation of thought (or repression of thought), it is enduring a kind of torture, self-imposed or otherwise. In the book *Knots* by psychiatrist R.D. Laing, the author, inspired by his experiences with his patients, described people's tendency to become entangled in feedback loops of thought as "knots, tangles, fankles, impasses, disjunctions,

whirligigs, binds.”<sup>5</sup> To be entangled in one’s thoughts can be perceived as torturous, and the looping videos make the torture unending.

Within the space, at first the viewer seems small and then large like Alice in Wonderland. The back half of the installation is quiet while the front half is loud. A room of opposites, order and balance. While it may fade into the background at times with familiarity and distance, the roaring water remains a constant.

In Bill Viola’s video *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986), the work begins with a quote from the *Rig Veda*, a sacred Hindu text, which reveals the origin of his title (Figure 24). The hour long video then progresses through a montage of imagery involving nature, then animals, and eventually humans. Throughout the work, perception is confused and challenged as the scenes perpetually shift view and scale. The attentive viewer is rewarded with breathtaking visions in both depth and breadth. Without the authority of a narrator or additional text, the viewer is invited to connect the parade of extraordinary imagery and attempt to come to their own conclusions. Like Viola, I find the body to be the point of entry into my work. "As with poetry, there's a cloud of meaning rather than a single point of meaning," said Viola of his piece. "For me, making the piece was about drawing a line between instinct and intellect, using the body as a model."<sup>6</sup> Similarly in Catholicism, the body is also an entry point to faith, in which the consumption of flesh and blood, metaphorically in the form of bread and wine, leads to salvation. Furthermore, in Catholicism, the self is broken up into mind, body, and spirit, a reflection of the Holy Trinity, whereas it is understood that one God is subdivided into three parts: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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<sup>5</sup> Laing, *Knots*, i.

<sup>6</sup> Shewey, "An Artist Finds Poetry in Videotape," H22.

In viewing the installation, the viewer becomes keenly aware of the relationship between their own mind, body, and spirit. The body can be understood through not only the physical layout of the space but also through its appearance in various states in the videos. The sound has both physical properties but also drowns out the mind. The mind can also be seen in each of the videos, whereas the spirit could be interpreted in the churning water. This alludes to an internal state, while the illumination created by the videos seems to likewise hint at a spiritual presence. The self-fragmentation is interconnected, complicated by a multiplicity of readings, and encapsulated into a whole by the space.

Embedded within the artifice of the videos is the performative aspect of the work. The knowledge that it is the artist's real body in the tide and the sand do not escape the mind of the viewer and offers an even stronger connection. Ideally, the ambiguous but complimentary juxtapositions of videos and sound in my installation will act like puzzle pieces and enable viewers to construct their own meanings, like the aforementioned mind, body, and spirit connections, while the immersive environment and dynamic shifts in scale will confuse their perceptions and encourage contemplation and exploration.

Sound is as important in this installation as the imagery as it acts as both a physical presence and a catalyst for investigation. In discussing the work of Bill Viola, Rhys Davies explains, "The inclusion of non-specific, archetypal sounds within an aural environment where they do not belong is a way of bypassing the rational, particularly when the sound is presented at a low level, contextualized and disguised with keynote signifiers of the visual location."<sup>7</sup> As was already mentioned, the majority of the sound in my installation can be traced to a manipu-

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<sup>7</sup> Davies, "The Frequency of Existence," 154.

lated boat engine. To explain his repeated use of a low rumbling sound, Bill Viola relates a story about his grandfather. He tells how his grandfather came to visit him in New York City as a child and how, upon hearing the constant din which creates the audio backdrop of life in a city, he confused it with the sound of the ocean to which he was familiar. Viola had not previously noticed the sound. He states:

It's the sound you hear when you're standing on a bridge looking out at the city, with the evening air still and nothing moving nearby. This under-sound exists at all times, even far out in the desert. Once I had heard it, I could never not hear it again. I think of it now as the sound of Being itself and I've used it many times in my work.<sup>8</sup>

Growing up on the ocean myself, I understand the "sound of Being" – its presence and constancy. It is that same presence, but amplified, which I hope inhabits my video installation.

The interplay and intensity of light and sound provide drama which helps to overpower the senses and attempts to engage the viewer. According to Christine Ross, "The acceleration of history is one of the key symptoms of modernity and that this pace has meant the progressive absorption of time by space as well as a growing disconnection between past, present, and future."<sup>9</sup> This is relevant considering that the installation is open-ended and loops infinitely, freeing the viewer to enter at any time and linger for as long as they desire. It is not as susceptible to being viewed at a glance like a painting due to this temporal aspect. Ross states, "The loop –

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<sup>8</sup> Viola, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, 56.

<sup>9</sup> Ross, "The Temporalities of Video," 84.

which has become one of the most important modes of presentation in video...allows for a temporal processing that can...lengthen duration experience precisely because the observer is solicited to attend to the passage of time and to allocate more attentional resources to processing time-related information.”<sup>10</sup> Space and time are closely linked in the installation as the viewer’s movement through space is simultaneously a movement through time. The viewer is immersed in the experience, both visually and auditorily, removed from the everyday, but not completely withdrawn as the body entices empathy. On the other hand, the disembodied head within the television, if taken as a reference to the mind, can also be seen in the context of Postmodern theorist Fredric Jameson’s statement that “Memory seems to play no role in television, commercial or otherwise (or, I am tempted to say, in postmodernism generally).”<sup>11</sup> Associations to the mind are furthered when considering art critic Bruce Kurtz’s statement, “Television, with its constantly changing configuration of dots of light, is an illusion of stillness.”<sup>12</sup> In the television, this illusion of stillness is broken up by the inaudible chattering and interrupted by the incoming tide drowning the face momentarily. The exploration of time is reinforced by the metaphor of the ocean, which is naturally repetitive in its ebb and flow – the clock of Being. I hope these elements together suggest the internal and external; past and future; the fragmented self; those connections and disconnections, much thicker than blood and water, which join and separate us like islands and water.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>11</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 70.

<sup>12</sup> Kurtz, “The Present Tense,” 234.

## 5. CONCLUSION

I remember staring at the fresh red stains on my crumpled sheets; my mattress and bedding tossed about the room – the aftermath of a struggle. The struggle never ends. I remember staring out over the ocean with my toes in the sand as the sun bursts through the horizon before me – hoping to quell my mind. We hope to seek out the hidden mysteries and self-awareness. I forget my mother's face at times. It phases in and out of my memory as if washed away by the sea. I forget the details that were once such a significant part of my life. I desperately hold on to what is left. Tragedy provides an opportunity to understand ourselves and make sense of events beyond our control. Since childhood, I have attempted to do this through my artistic practice, attempting increasingly to make myself more vulnerable. I create and recreate my own meaning and define my own existence in spite of terrible, inescapable truths. Our daily struggles define us, if we ever truly are defined, and art allows me to reflect and redefine myself. Viewers are likewise able to similarly construct their own meanings born from the bombardment of stimulus inside my video installation based on their own experiences. In provoking others into considering existential questions and exploration of the self as well as our relationships with space, time and connections in general, I hope to provide viewers with opportunity for reflection and reaction.



Figure 1: Abbott Handerson Thayer, *Winged Figure*, 1889.



Figure 2: Edvard Munch, *Madonna*, 1895 - 1902.







Figure 4: James O'Donnell, *Need*, 2009.



Figure 5: James O'Donnell, *Inner-child*, 2010.





Figure 6: James O'Donnell, *I - S - T - L - N - E*, 2010.



Figure 7: James O'Donnell, *Doesn't Fall Far*, 2010.



Figure 8: Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 0*, 1974.

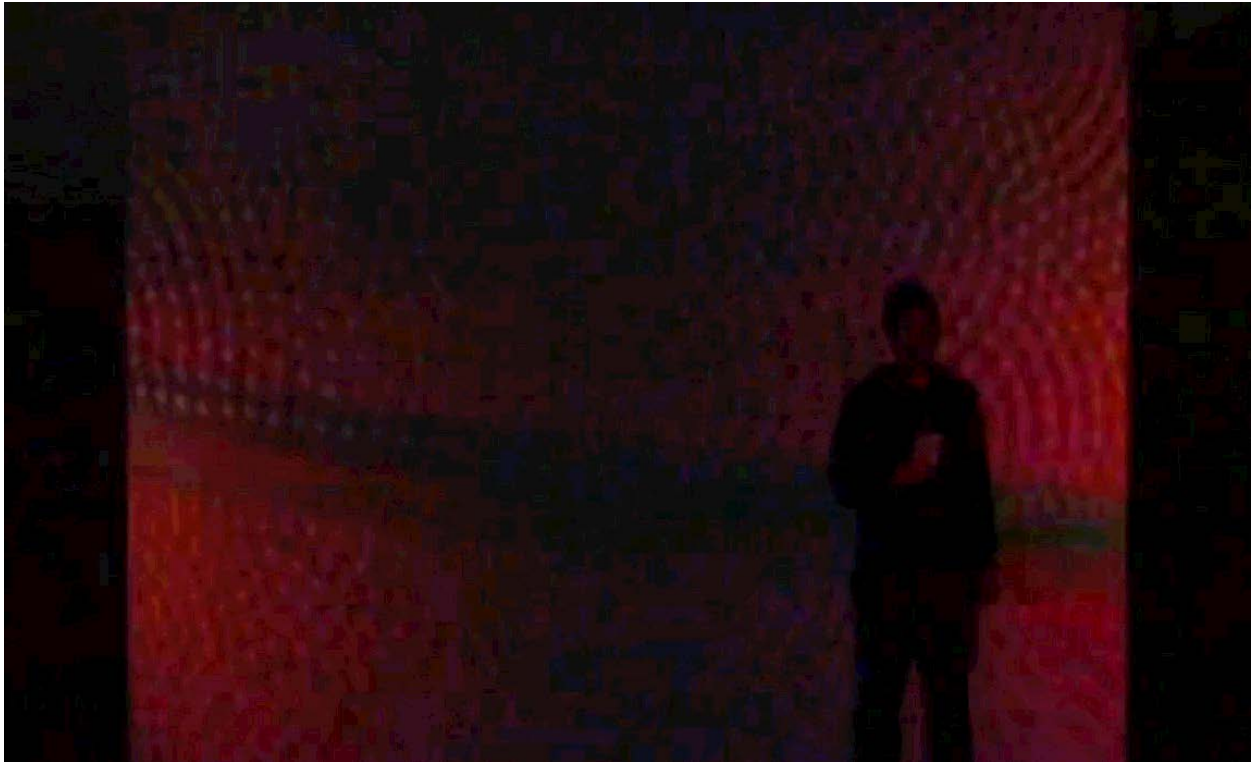


Figure 9: James O'Donnell, *Dialogue with Dad (Still)*, 2011.



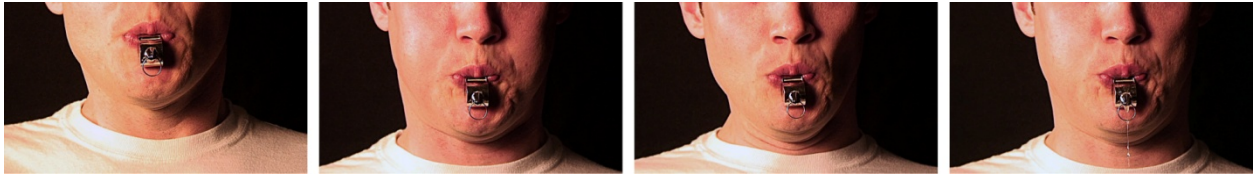


Figure 10: James O'Donnell, *Whistle (Stills)*, 2011.



Figure 11: James O'Donnell, *Love Letters to the Sea (Still)*, by James O'Donnell, 2010.

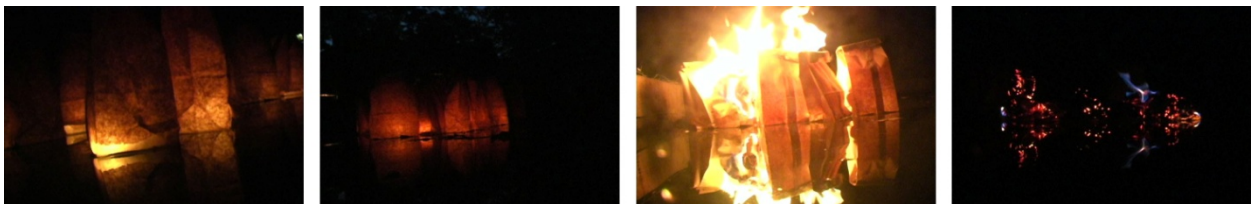


Figure 12: James O'Donnell, *More than our hearts can hold (Stills)*, 2010.



Figure 13: James O'Donnell, *As Long As We Carry Them (View 1)*, 2010.



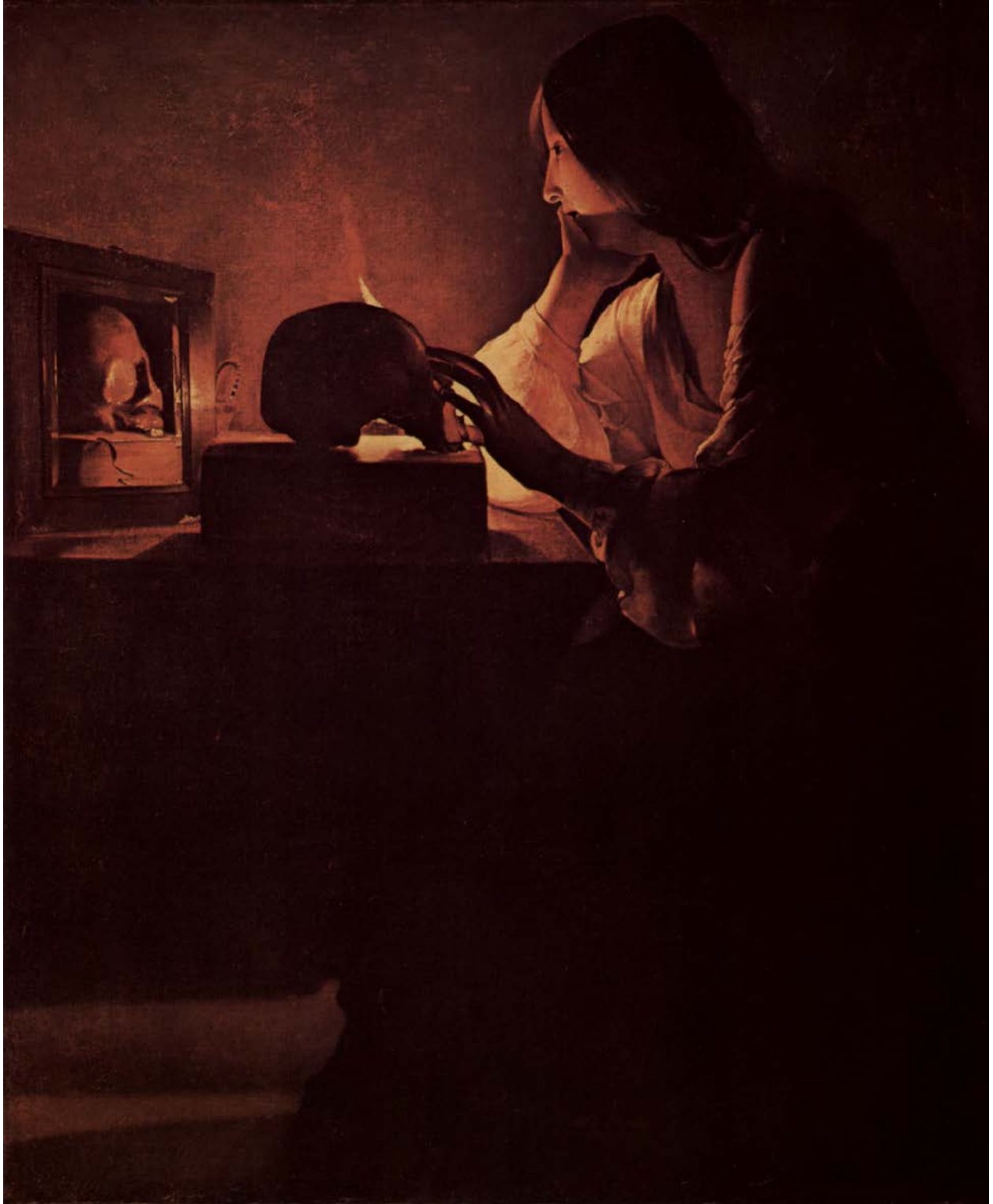


Figure 14: Georges de la Tour, *Repeating Magdalene*, 1630.



Figure 15: James O'Donnell, *As Long As We Carry Them (View 2)*, 2010.



Figure 16: James O'Donnell, *Eternity and Grandma's Fridge (Still)*, 2011.



Figure 17: James O'Donnell, *Where do we go from here? (View 1)*, 2012.



Figure 18: James O'Donnell, *Where do we go from here? (Still 1)*, 2012.





Figure 19: James O'Donnell, *Where do we go from here? (Still 2)*, 2012.



Figure 20: Caspar David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*, 1808 - 10.



Figure 21: James O'Donnell, *Where do we go from here? (View 2)*, 2012.



Figure 22: James O'Donnell, *Where do we go from here? (Still 3)*, 2012.





Figure 23: James O'Donnell, *Where do we go from here?* (Still 4), 2012.



Figure 24: James O'Donnell, *I Don't Know What It Is I Am Like (Stills)*, 1986.



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10. Ibid.
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