

The Quick and the Dead
Rites of Passage in Art, Spirit and Life

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The Quick and the Dead

Rites of Passage in Art, Spirit and Life

28 May - 27 June 2009

Curator: David Elliott

SUSAN HILLER

Born 1940 in Tallahassee, Florida, USA

Lives and works in London, United Kingdom

Abbreviated Bibliography

Alexandra Kokoli (ed.), *Susan Hiller: The Provisional Texture of Reality, Selected Talks and Texts, 1977-2007*, Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2008.

James Lingwood (ed.), *Susan Hiller: Recall, Selected Works 1969-2004*, Gateshead: Baltic, 2004.

Magic Lantern, 1987, audio-visual installation: slide projections with synchronized soundtrack; 3 carousels each with twelve 35mm slides, driven by electronic pulses. Programme duration 12 minutes. Dimensions variable. Edition 1/3. Courtesy the artist and Timothy Taylor Gallery, London.

ARAYA RASDJARMREARNSOOK

Born 1957 in Trad, Thailand

Lives and works in Chiang Mai, Thailand

Abbreviated Bibliography

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Why Is It Poetry Rather Than Awareness?* Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 2000-2002.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Lament*, Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 1999.

Conversation I, 2005, video installation, 5 videos, duration 12 minutes. Dimensions variable. Photograph by Eeakarach Prangchaikul. Courtesy of the artist by arrangement with 100 Tonson Gallery.

BILL VIOLA

Born 1951 in New York, USA.

Lives and works in Long Beach, California, USA.

Abbreviated Bibliography

David Elliott, *Hatsu-Yume (First Dream): The Video Art of Bill Viola*, Tokyo: Mori Art Museum, 2006.

Chris Townsend (ed.), *The Art of Bill Viola*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2004.

John Walsh (ed.), *The Passions*, Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003.

Marvin Heiferman and Lisa Phillips, with John Hanhardt, *Image World: Art and Media Culture*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1989.

Hatsu-Yume (First Dream), 1981, for Daien Tanaka, videotape, color, stereo sound, duration 56 minutes. Courtesy the artist.

When we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries: they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you. Who shall give account to him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead. For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.¹

THINKING ABOUT THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

When I was asked to devise on a small scale an exhibition that would reflect, but not duplicate, some of the preoccupations of the next Biennale of Sydney, I lost little time in visiting the space where the work would be shown. I can't really pin it down, but there was something in the strictness of the Ivan Dougherty Gallery's tripartite structure that immediately not only made me think about the work of the three artists you see here, but also about the significance of ideas of transcendence in modern and contemporary art.

We live indeed in transcendent times! The Western exclusivity of world-wide power that emerged out of the European Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution is being eroded by another, yet-to-be fully recognized, order. Such a reality, viewed in many different ways, will be central to the 17th Biennale of Sydney (2010). Here I have decided to present earlier works by Susan Hiller, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, and Bill Viola, artists who will be represented by more recent works next year. What they have in common is a fascination with, and openness to ideas of memory, transcendence, even transmutation. In this respect they are the tip of an iceberg of a fundamental tendency that has always been present, but often submerged, not only in modern and contemporary art but also throughout the whole history of culture.² It is misleading to think that the Enlightenment and the cultures that sprang from it were based only on iron "laws" of reason and self-interest. There have always been other, opposing, "irrational" approaches and stories.

The whole idea of personal, artistic and institutional autonomy, the aesthetic system upon which modern and contemporary art has been based, is derived from Immanuel Kant's meticulous analyses of the pitfalls of rationalism in "Critique of Pure Reason" and "Critique of Judgment", both written at the end of the eighteenth century.³ Art has hardly ever been a rational activity; not only does it expand possibilities and dreams of what it is like to be alive, but it also taps into barely submerged mythic and psychological reserves, ignored at our peril, which we all have the capacity to recognise.

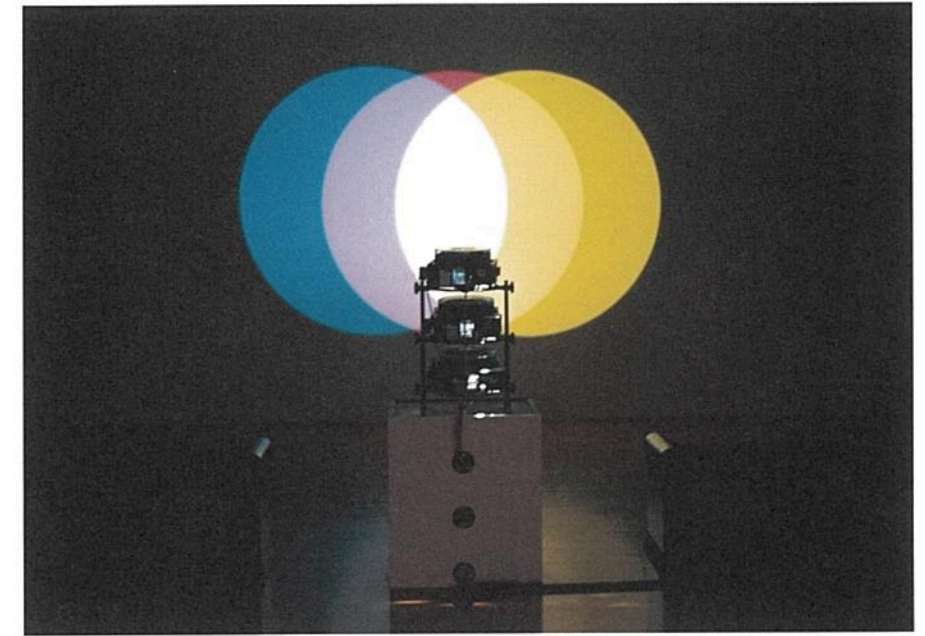
All three works shown here hint at networks of response, emotion and experience that are much greater than can ever be either known or demonstrated – age-old rites of passage between life, death, spirit and art. The title of the exhibition, *The*

Quick and the Dead, taken from a resonant passage in the King James Bible, implies no Christian intent, but highlights rather an interrogation of conventional, some would say "modern", ideas of memory, loss, belief, expectation and action, one that I would argue can only be conducted through art.

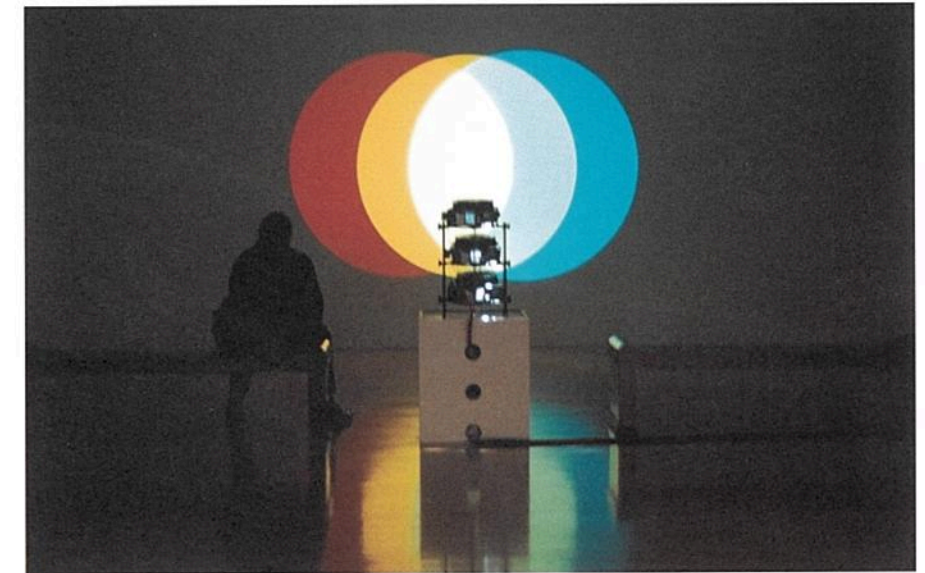
Often misinterpreted as a gunslinger's credo in the titles of Westerns, the passage quoted above from Saint Peter's letters in the Bible states that God alone has the capacity to judge the dead as well as the living (the quick), because the spirit continues to live after death.⁴ Out of this assertion developed an elaboration of divine power in which Christ, in an elaboration of Orphic and other previous Hellenic myths, not only ascended into Heaven but also descended into Hell.⁵ This is the origin of "The Harrowing of Hell", one of the most redolent images of early Christian iconography, in which Christ penetrates and attacks the Underworld by releasing from its maw righteous Elders from the Old Testament.⁶ Whatever one may think about the theology of judgment and sin, particularly when applied, as above, to "lasciviousness, lust, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings...", the idea of continuity of spirit is fundamental to all systems of belief. On a metaphorical level at least, the viral spread and long life of this image of the liberation of souls not only illustrates the victory of art, creativity, and imagination over death or oppression, but also alludes to how art has the power to transcend barriers of space, geography, belief and time.⁷

The doctrine of the continuing life of the spirit is also echoed in the cyclical rhythms of Eastern philosophy in which continuing patterns of birth, death and rebirth offer opportunities for either the refinement or the degradation of the soul according to the moral actions of the life that has been lived. Here, unlike in the West, the barrier is not sin, but desire. Enlightenment can only be achieved once desire has been vanquished – the double bind being that enlightenment cannot be achieved through desire. The spirit here has an independent life from the body which, once dead, is regarded as little more than an empty shell.⁸ Life has moved on, there is no such thing as the death of the spirit.

From the early 1970s Susan Hiller has been concerned with both the psychology and taxonomy of memory and myth in her work. Originally trained as an anthropologist as well as an artist, she has studied both the flourishing and disappearance of peoples and cultures at different times and has continued to extrapolate this to the present. One of her earliest works *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists* investigated in a typically witty way the existence of a collective subconscious. It consisted of a presentation of many different postcards she had collected that all had the title "Rough Sea". Here she was excavating not only a typology of a particular kind of image but also a cultural phenomenon. The postcards had an obvious function, bearing glad tidings home from people on holiday, but their image also expressed other layers of meaning: the battle for survival within nature, even an analogy of the pitfalls of human life – with a maritime Freudian gloss of sexual threat.



SUSAN HILLER *Magic Lantern* 1987



Much of Hiller's work is concerned with matters of the spiritual and so-called paranormal, placed within the wider context of cultural haunting and historical survival. She has been fascinated by dreams, the supernatural and near death experiences – combining them with the poetics of fragments, memory, loss and the almost irretrievable. A recent work *The J Street Project*, 2002-05, has recorded all the street names in Germany with the prefix *Juden* (Jews): "The Jews are gone," Susan Hiller has explained, "but the street names remain as ghosts of the past, haunting the present."

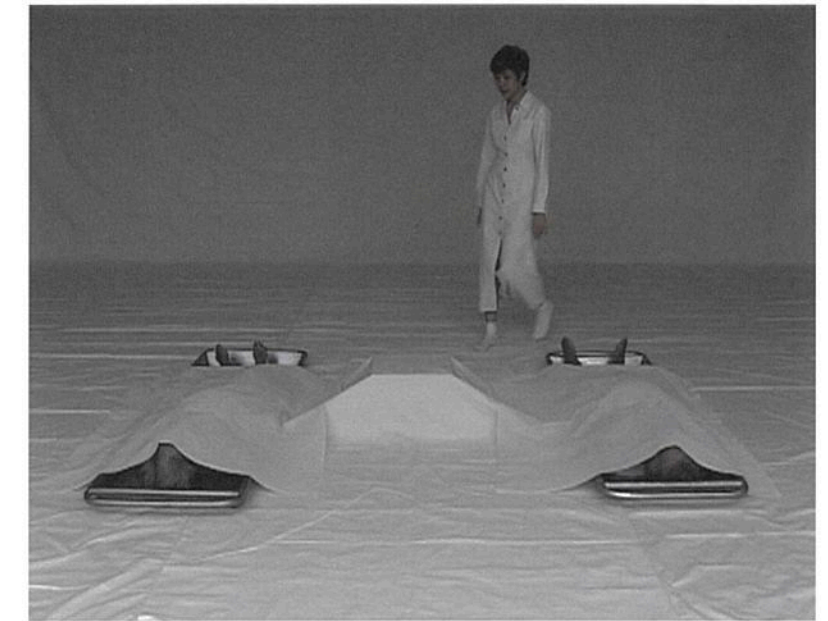
A similar, but less specific, sense of the historically uncanny can be felt in *Magic Lantern*, 1987, the three slide projection and soundtrack shown in this exhibition. The rhythmical projection of three discs in standard colours – red, yellow, blue – in various sizes, sometimes overlapping, creates an almost hypnotic haze. The strength and clarity of the colours leaves an afterimage on the retina that mixes with the new colour, just as their intersection also forms another hue. It is not long before three simple colours have become a dynamic, shifting field of uncertainty and flux.

In counterpoint to the seduction of this floating, abstract world, a sound track draws on the parapsychic recordings of the Latvian psychologist and pioneer of Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP) Konstantin Raudive.⁹ Out of the amplified chaotic hiss of his tapes, prompted by the voices of "interpreters", subliminally, we begin to recognise coherence in these voices from beyond. This is subtly highlighted by the artist when the Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky appears to utter forth against a deluge of Soviet red, while Winston Churchill booms out against a more conservative backdrop of blue.

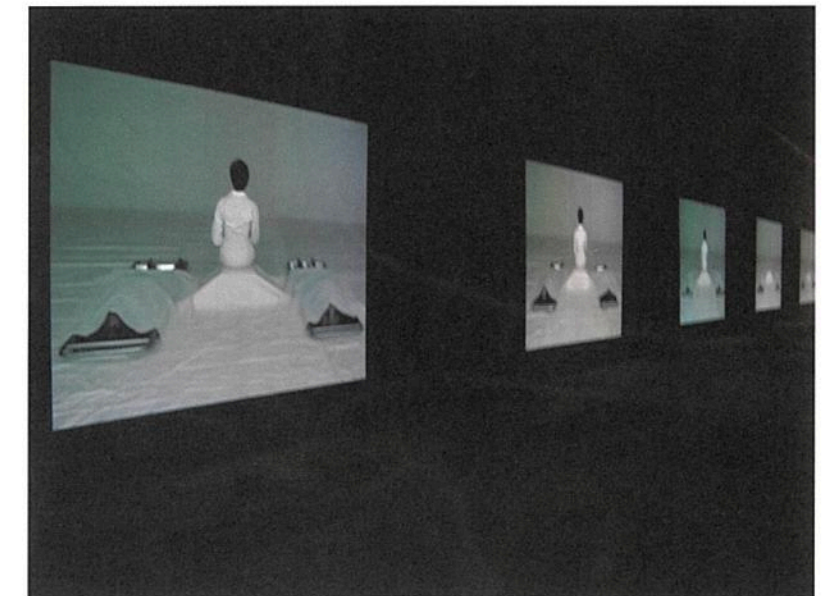
These recordings are intercut with the abstract tones of the artist's own voice, redubbed to create an echoing, four fold polyphony that, like the seemingly random mixing of the discs of light, creates its own harmonies and dissonances. As this fades away along with the colour, we are left with an unsettling feeling not so different from that derived from the Japanese horror film *Ring*, 1998: the rationality and good will of the machine cannot be taken for granted and may conceal other deeper, terrifying, and more powerful realities.¹⁰

In her video installations Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook has created a similarly witty and unsettling discourse that questions observers' perceptions of reality, consciousness and the spirit. Working in Thailand, a Buddhist country, her points of reference are different from those of Hiller, but essentially her attitude towards the myths of modernity and the spirit are close.

During the 1980s she started to work as an artist by making complex, often three dimensional, prints. In the mid-1990s she began constructing a series of installations and objects which not only examined different aspects of mortality



ARAYA RASDJARMREARNSOOK *Conversation I* 2005



but also reflected on growing materialism in Thai society. Dark, bleak works such as *Dinner with Cancer*, 1994 or *When an Object Gets Sick*, 1996, express her self-questioning mood at this time. She first began to use video in such works as *Reading for Three Female Corpses*, 1997, in which she chanted poems to three women who had passed away and had no families to look after them.

This was the beginning of a long series of works with cadavers in which the location and the persona of the artist change while the tone ranges from elegiac lament to propitiation to absurd comedy. Sometimes we are obviously in a hospital morgue, at others the space is more neutral, as in *Conversation I*, 2005, the five screen installation shown here, yet at others it is like a school room, where she plays the role of a teacher lecturing inanimate bodies as in *Death Seminar I-II*, 2005. Her dress and demeanor change accordingly, yet she is constantly talking to the mute cadavers as if they were alive.

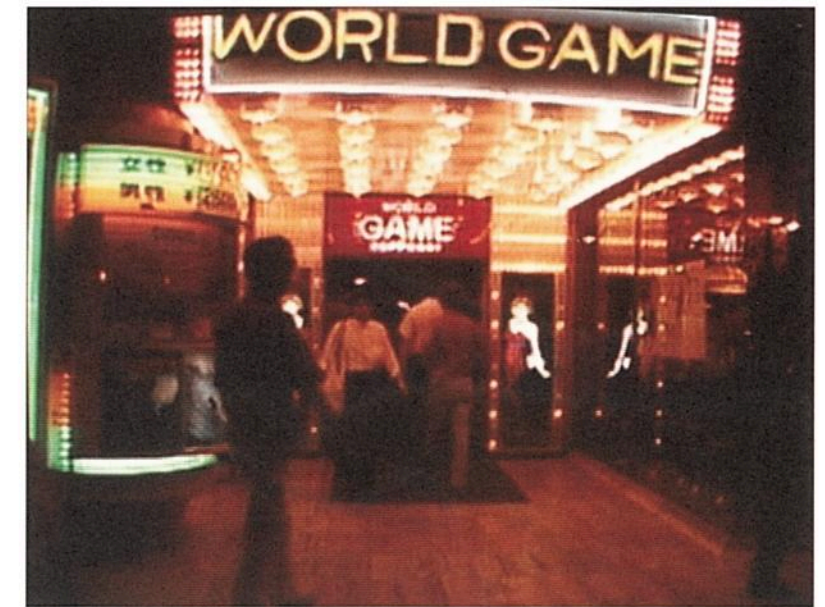
Conversation I was originally shown in the Cloister of the Convento di San Francisco della Vigna, the Thai Pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Its rhythmical simplicity and austerity reflected on both the architecture and function of the monks' burial ground, but this does not mean that this work cannot also be redolent in the more neutral white spaces of an art gallery. Rasdjarmreansook employs the dead as a foil to the living, through her actions and questions she creates an ideal mirror of a non-materialistic society in which everyone is equal and desire has no place. This is a very particular, ethereal kind of beauty.

Developing out of Conceptual Art in the early 1970s, Bill Viola's early work was primarily concerned with both performance (often using himself as the subject) and the process of making art, through an exploration of the limits of the medium of video. Gradually, within this manner of working, he began to incorporate an examination of different states of human consciousness and experience, increasingly drawing on Zen Buddhism, Christian Mysticism and Islamic Sufism as both gateways of perception and sources of imagery.

The 56 minute, single channel video *Hatsu-Yume (First Dream)*, 1981, is critical for his early development and marks a shift away from the authority of the gallery or performance space to a meditation on the world outside.¹¹ In popular Japanese culture *Hatsu-Yume (First Dream)*, is the first dream of the New Year that foretells the luck of the dreamer during the coming months.¹² But Viola does not involve himself with such detail, rather he uses this idea as a window onto shifting planes of perception, expressed in terms of a multi-personal journey or rite of passage. Its poetic scope refers also to primordial creation myths and even to the symbolically charged landscapes of aboriginal dreamtimes. It is the most painterly of his early works; the camera moves slowly, like a calligraphic brush loaded with light rather than ink. In a reference to traditional Japanese scroll painting, a golden carp shimmers in and out of focus under rippling water.



BILL VIOLA *Hatsu-Yume (First Dream)* 1981



The film begins at dawn and ends at night, growing out of darkness and alternating between cycles of darkness and light. An initial shot of a dark sky with the sun rapidly expanding and dilating over a range of mountains moves from sombre, crashing waves, to wind-blown sand dunes, to scudding clouds and mountain mists, to remote, barren landscapes, to the brash neon of Tokyo's entertainment districts. The lingering camera creates a climactic point, panning over the remote, other-worldly, volcanic desert of Mount Osorezan, where many people still travel each year to honour and communicate with the souls of the dead. But we also experience the quirky, slo-mo intimacy of families on a day out, or the alienation of a lonely man in a slot arcade, all locked into time and space.

It ends with the flickering, uncertain lights of travellers trailing through a dark, bamboo forest, a place where the Japanese believe spirits roam – an intimation of this is given in the light smears in the camera tubes, an “incorrect” use of then new technology that can no longer be replicated by cameras today.

This progression in this film may even be understood as a kind of abstract road movie or *bildungsroman* – a distillation of many journeys, sensations, lives, paths, ways. But there are no protagonists here, no linear narratives – there hardly ever are in Viola's work.

Light, like the sea and life itself, flows, floods, ebbs and, in the process, changes. A day has passed, the world has changed – many beginnings and endings along the way have all been subsumed within a larger cycle.

It is this sense of openness, of wonder, of infinite possibilities growing out of a finite world, that characterises the work of the artists shown here. We all come from somewhere and are products of our own histories, families and backgrounds yet, for a short time, we also have the possibility not only of celebrating life but of making a difference both to it and the future. In the end it comes down to a relatively simple choice: to be either quick or dead in our lives and actions. At the very least, the work in this exhibition offers experiences and possibilities that may help us in coming to a decision.

David Elliott 2009

1. The Holy Bible, King James Version (1604–1611). First Epistle of Saint Peter, Chap. 4. Verses 3–6.
2. In the modern period I am thinking particularly of the Romantic, Decadent, Symbolist, Spiritual and Primitivist “counter-cultures”. See, as an introduction to this subject, Mario Praz, “The Romantic Agony,” Oxford, 1981 edn.
3. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) “Kritik der reinen Vernunft,” 1781–1787, “Kritik der Urteilskraft,” 1790.
4. “The Quick and the Dead” (1987), based on Louis L'Amour's novel, Director: Robert Day. A film of the same title was made in 1995 directed by Sam Raimi.
5. See also the text of “The Apostles' Creed”.

6. These numbered, amongst others, Adam and Eve, Methuselah, Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, David and Job. One of the earliest large-scale representations of “The Harrowing of Hell” is in a cycle of Byzantine wall paintings and mosaics in the Chora Church, Istanbul, c.1300.
7. “The Harrowing of Hell” – Christ's Descent into Limbo – is certainly related to earlier Hellenistic myths of heroic descent into the underworld. The story of Orpheus with its mystical stress on the power of art is only one of these that appear also in, for example, Homer, “Odyssey XI” (800 BCE) and Virgil, “Aeneid” (29–19 BCE). Even earlier versions of similar stories are related to the Egyptian Cult of Osiris (c 2500 BCE) and to the Sumerian legends in the “Epic of Gilgamesh” (c. 2000 BCE) as well as in Japanese and indigenous American mythologies. In more recent times these ideas have been revisited in many different ways, most notably by Dante in “Inferno”, part of “The Divine Comedy”, 1308–21, and Jean Cocteau in his Orphic trilogy of films: “Blood of a Poet”, 1930, “Orpheus”, 1949, “Testament of Orpheus”, 1960.
8. The Parsees and some sects within Mahayana Buddhism still conduct the practice of Sky Burials in which dead bodies are left out in the open to be consumed by birds. The bones are then either cremated or collected and interred in sacred sites. Some Indigenous Australian people also followed similar practices but these have been discouraged by the Christian church. See the film “Djalambu”, 1964. Directed by Cecil Holmes for AIA[TS]S. Source given by Djon Mundine.
9. Konstantin Raudive (1906–1974) was a pupil of Carl Jung. During the late 1960s he conducted a series of experiments by leaving a tape recorder running in an empty soundproof room and claimed that the amplified recordings that resulted from this were the voices of the dead, including some well-known historical figures.
10. *Ringu* 1998. Directed by Hideo Nakata from a novel of the same name by Koji Suzuki which draws from the well-known Japanese folk tale *Bancho Sarayashiki* (“The Dish Mansion at Bancho”). In the film a devil-like figure, triggered by the playing of a particular video-tape, crawls out of a television set to wreak revenge.
11. It was shot, recorded and edited in Japan in 1981 during an eighteenth month residency at Sony Corporation's Atsugi Research Laboratories.
12. Traditionally the three best images to appear in such a dream are a Hawk, Mount Fuji or an eggplant which in different ways suggest success and an auspicious future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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In addition I am indebted to the assistance of Nick Waterlow OAM, Director, and curators Adrian Davies and Margaret Farmer of the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, as well as to The Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, the Biennale of Sydney, and UNSW's COFAspace for their invaluable loans of equipment.

David Elliott, Curator