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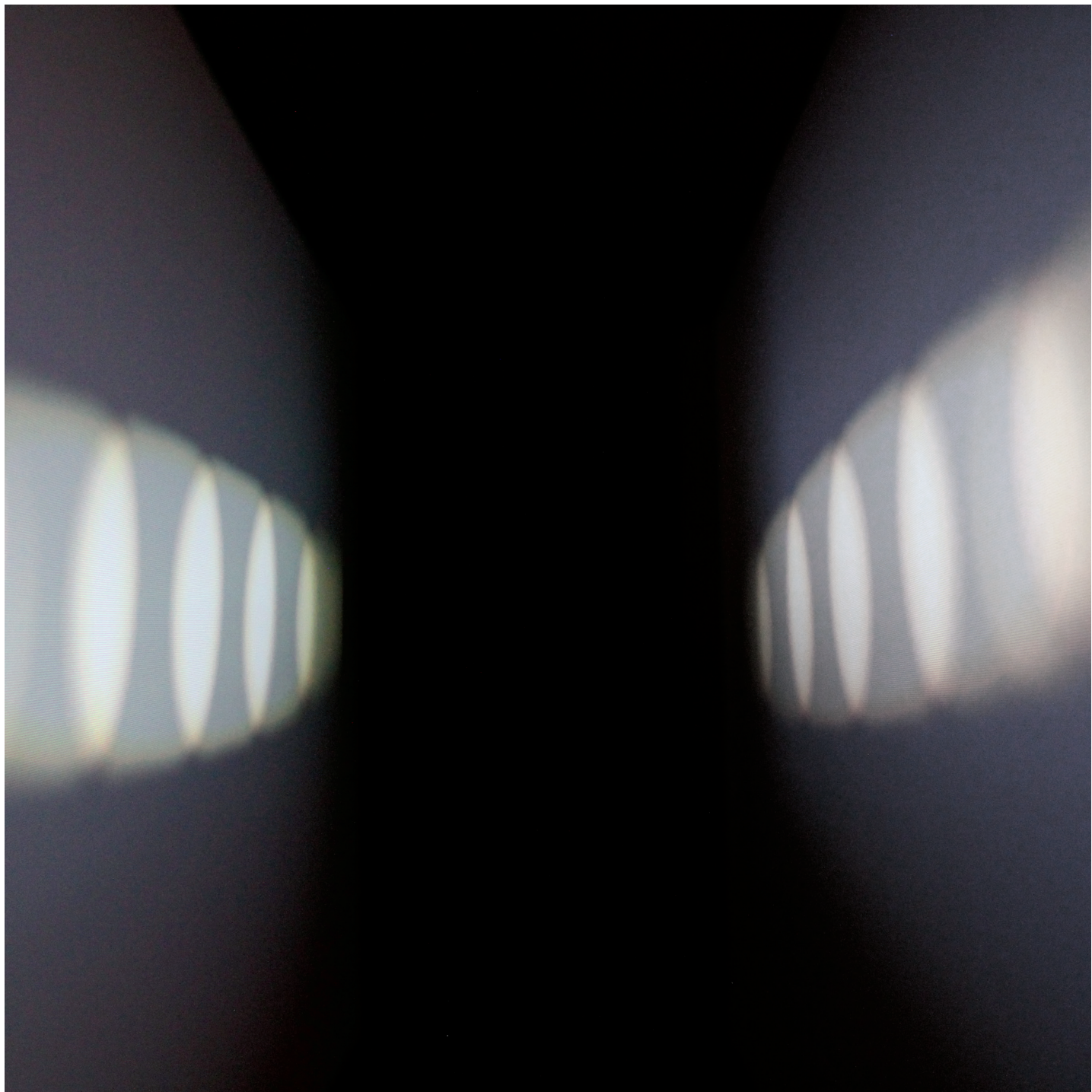TASMAN RICHARDSON

NECROPOLIS

CURATED BY RHONDA CORVESE

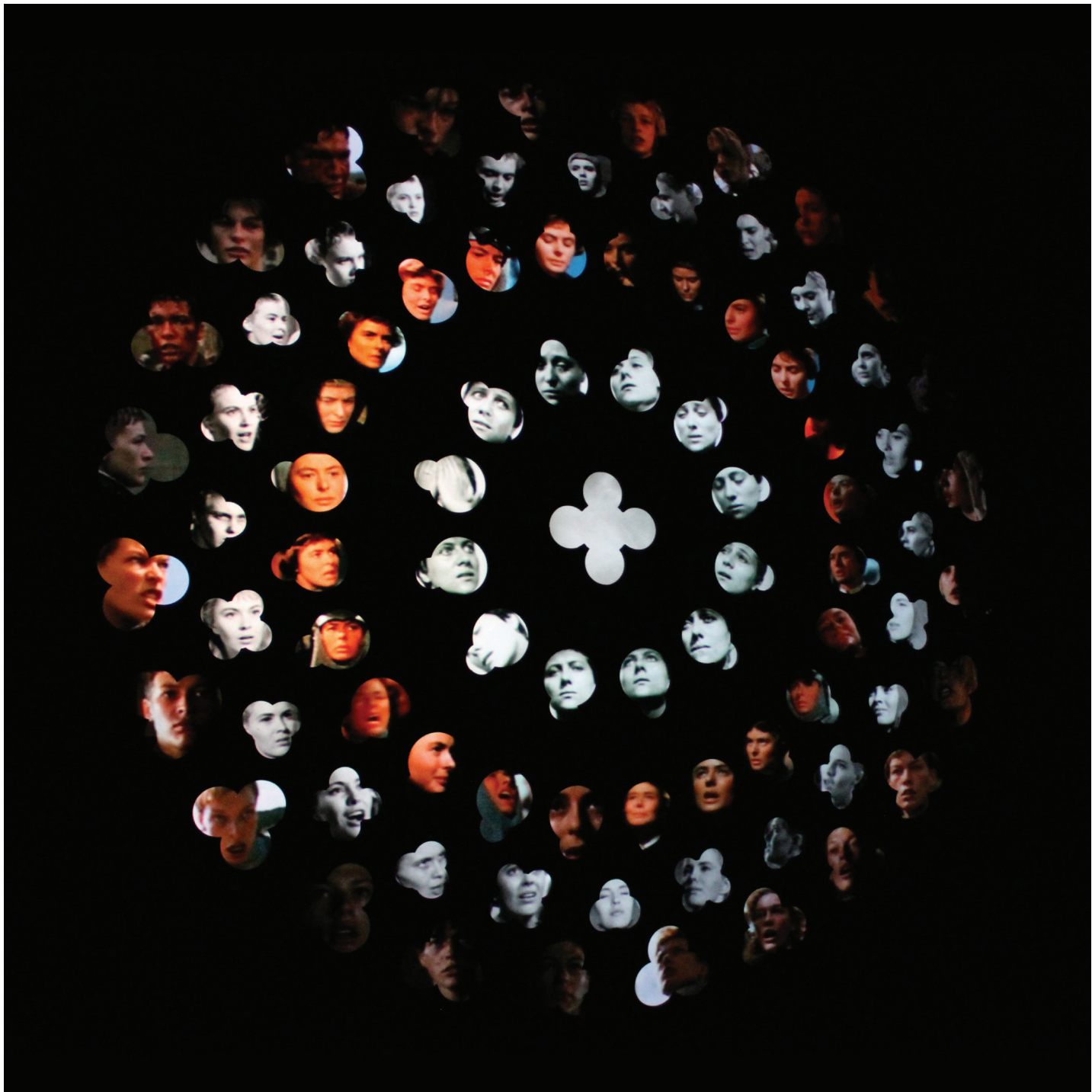PRESENTED BY THE MUSEUM OF

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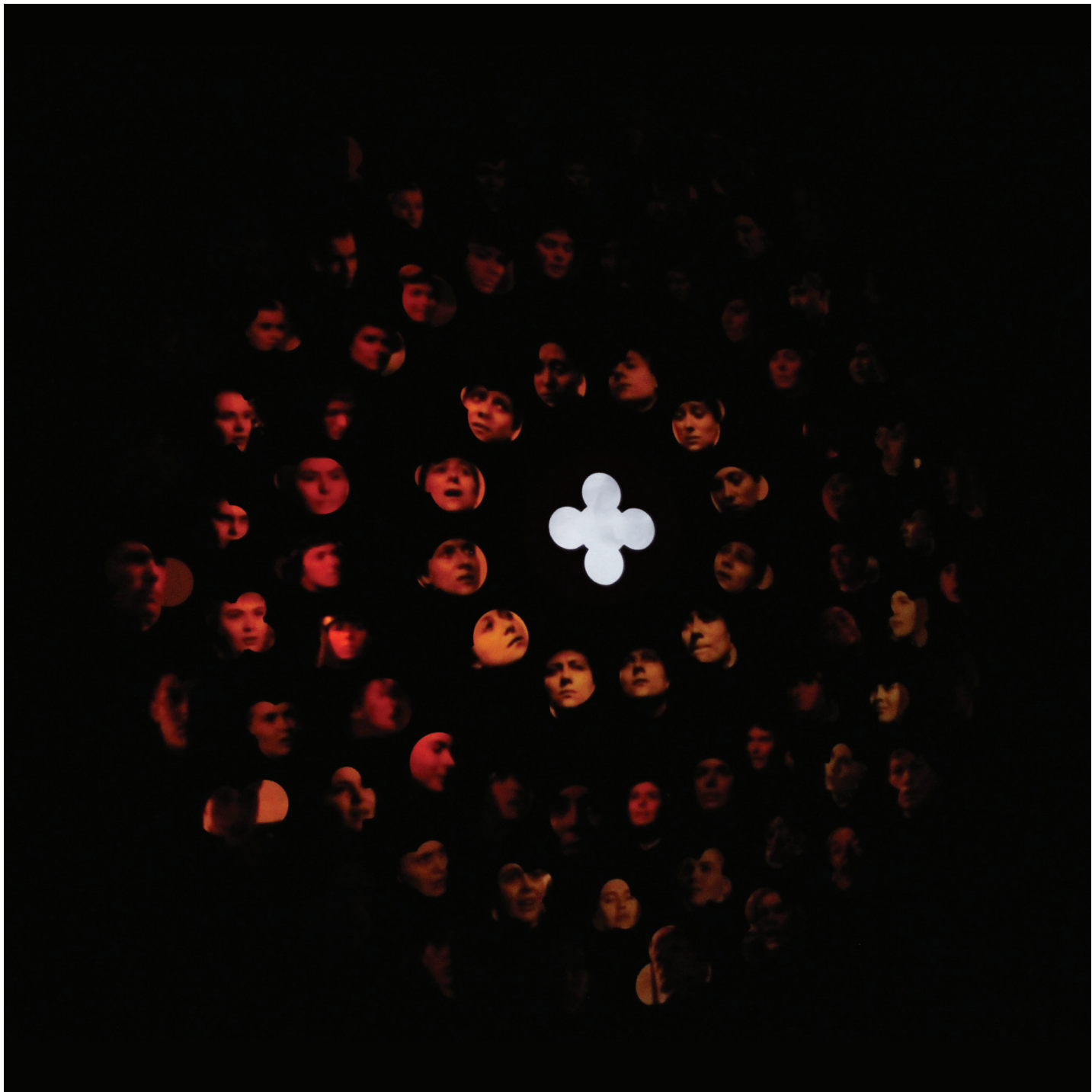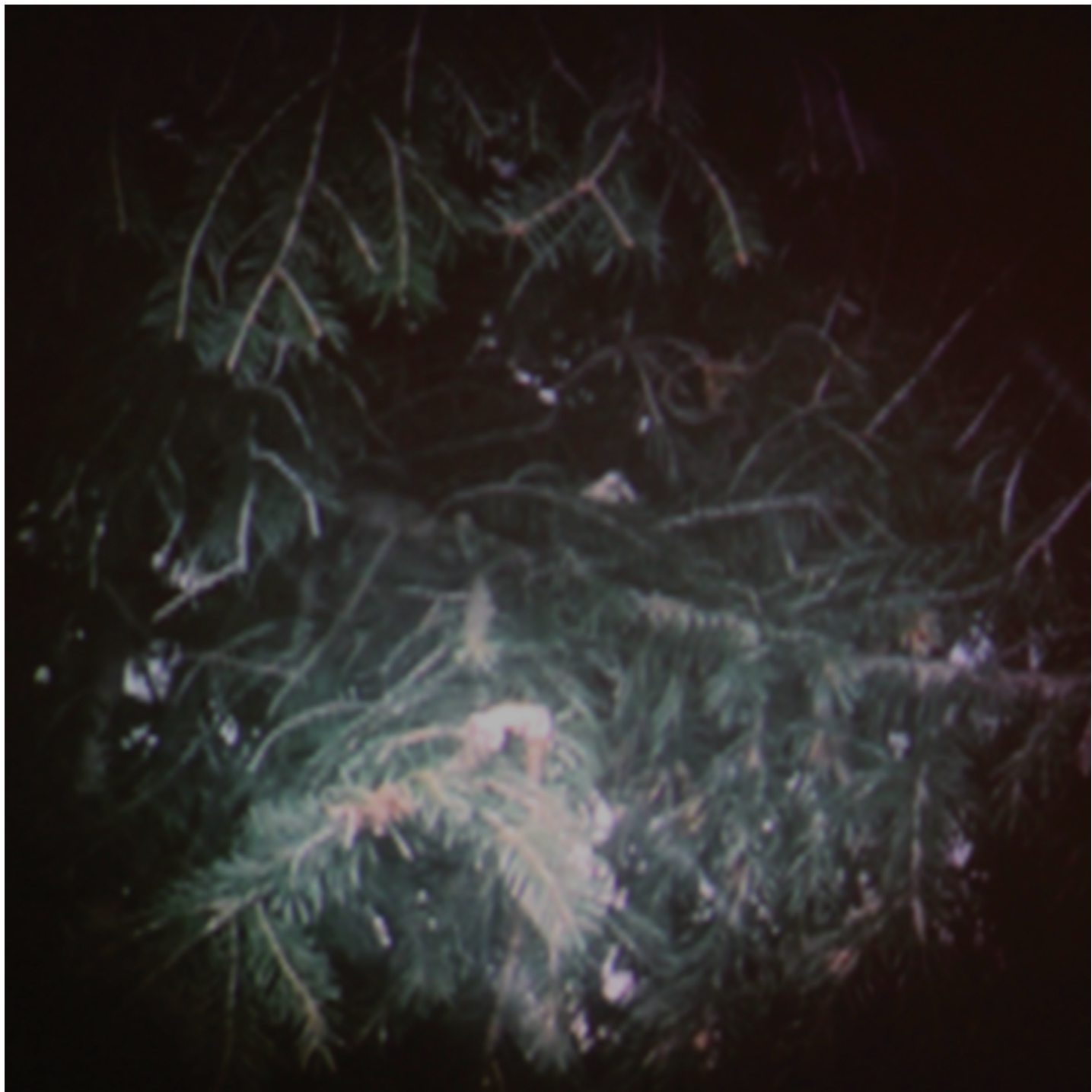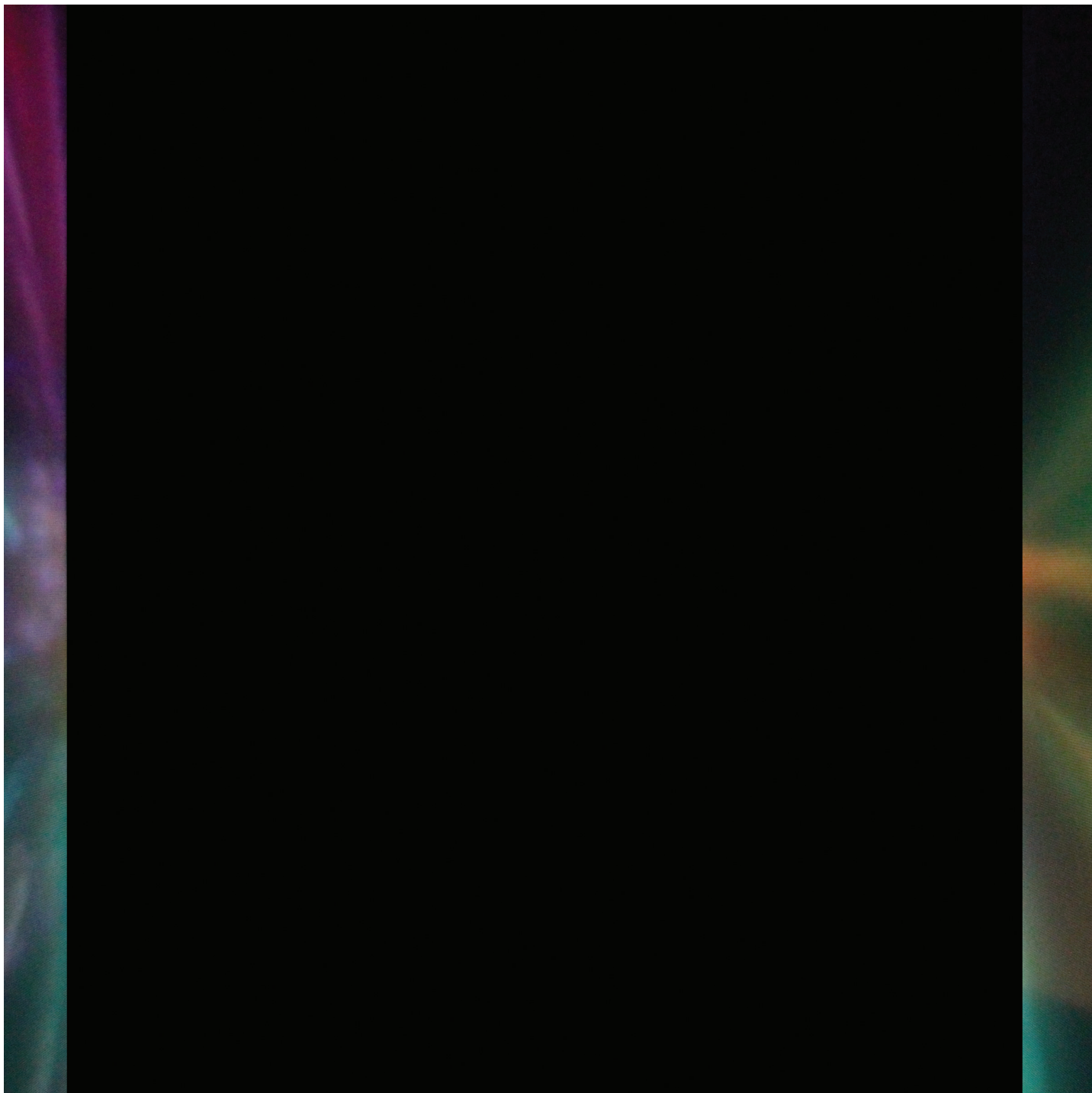
FEBRUARY 4 . APRIL 1 . 2012

FOREWORD

Technology has always been a part of our lives to greater or lesser degrees but certainly ours is an unprecedented era where technology has been profoundly assimilated into our lives, into our culture, into our very beings, in ways that we have yet to fully comprehend.

We mostly develop technologies to make our lives easier, more convenient, and more enjoyable; technology represents our utopian aspirations. But what is also becoming apparent is that our reliance and passive acceptance of technology may be affecting us in ways that may not, in the end, be in our best interests. Consider the dehumanizing and destructive effects of mass industrial and sophisticated military technologies; how technology has estranged us from nature, how it accelerates cycles of consumption and disposability. At this point, technology is the fulcrum between utopic desire and a dystopic existence. For over a decade now, Toronto-based artist Tasman Richardson has been producing innovative video works that utilize advanced digital technologies to scavenge the rubble of media-based popular culture – television, cinema, the Internet - reflecting our behaviours and the culture of our times.

For the past three years Tasman has been developing NECROPOLIS, his most complex and ambitious project to date, representing a culmination of the themes and issues that have long been at the core of his practice. By subjecting viewers to an intense, immersive technological experience he provokes a visceral confrontation with the dark and seductive beauty of technology, challenging us to question our feelings and understandings of that experience. Given the scale and scope of this project, and the timely issues that he brings forward, the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art is pleased to present NECROPOLIS within the context of our mandate to engage audiences with topics and concerns that are relevant to our times.
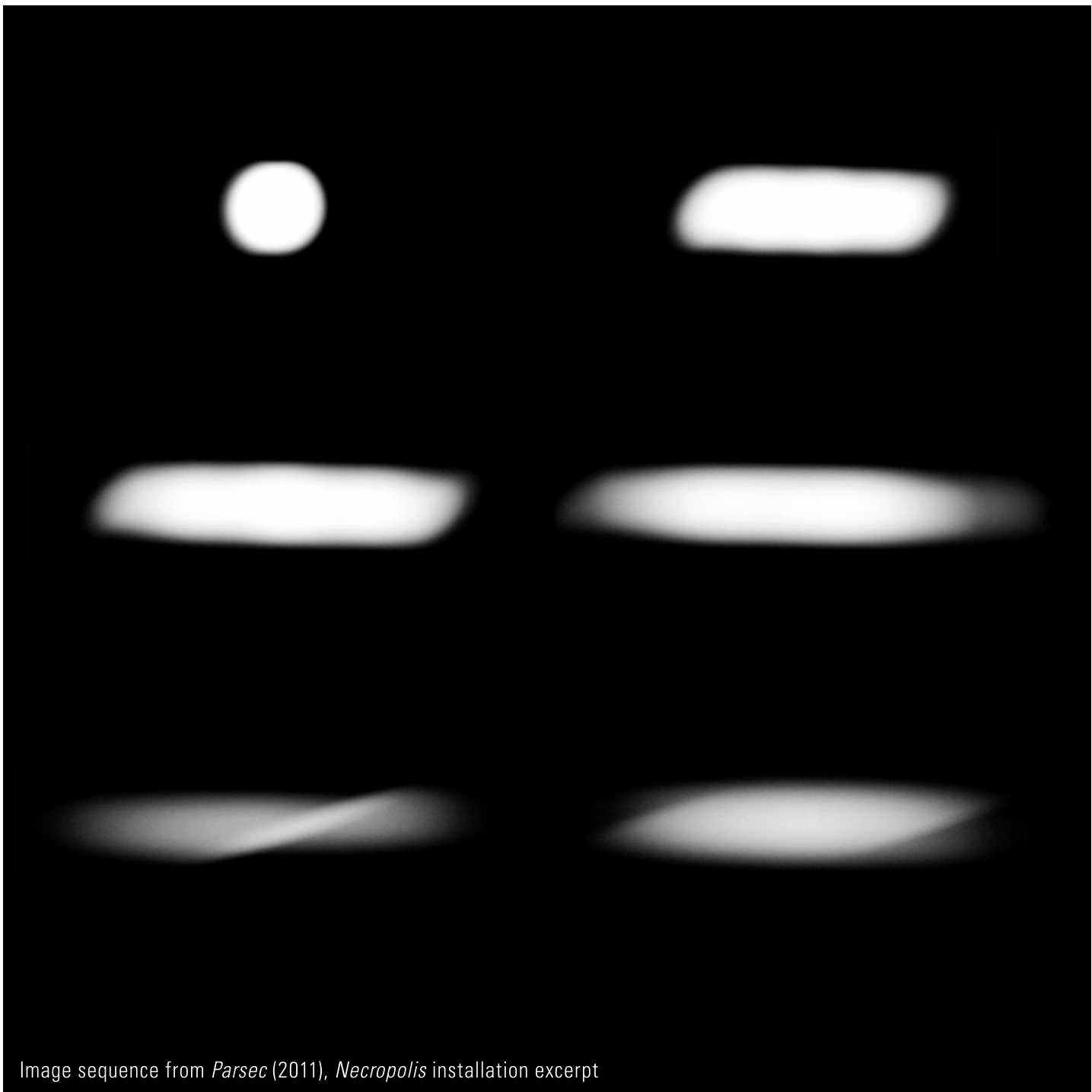
David Liss
Artistic Director and Curator

Image sequence from *Parsec* (2011), *Necropolis* installation excerpt

CONTEMPORARY NECROMANCY

In The Mysterious Virtue, Bill Viola made very clear the effects of sound waves on stone. He exposed the power of the unseen to touch and erode when it is combined with the vast depth of time. The unheard shares the same quality. Waves are waves, and all waves, though fluid and gentle, do make contact and do imprint themselves. Eventually, they etch their shifting, erratic noise on all that is immersed in them. The ghost in the machine has teeth; but, as editors, we can bite back.

Necromancy is not a mystical trick of the past. It survives in our contemporary electronic culture. The medium and the media are one in the sense that recordings contain the spirits of the dead. Their moments, captured in time, are manipulated and made to materialize at will. Ouija boards are long abandoned in favour of remote controls.

Now, we seek to further merge with the ethereal by broadcasting ourselves through grassroots, do-it-yourself Internet culture. It seems that we're more real if our image is remembered by a vastly anonymous audience than when we depend on our memories in isolation. A metaphysical crisis evolves from "If it's unseen, does it exist?" to "If I'm unseen, do I exist?" What feels real and is measurably real has become ambiguous.

The fictions that are woven for us are too scripted to reflect our unrehearsed, erratic lives. Immersed in canned time and canned laughter, more often it is the recorded company we keep that shapes our behaviors.

Characters are memetic viruses that can exist in dormancy for long periods, waiting for an opportunity to be given new life by writers, producers, and the like. They become restless souls. At first conceived of loosely, they reach maturity in our absence, and then re-emerge as fully fledged personalities with a continuity of their own.
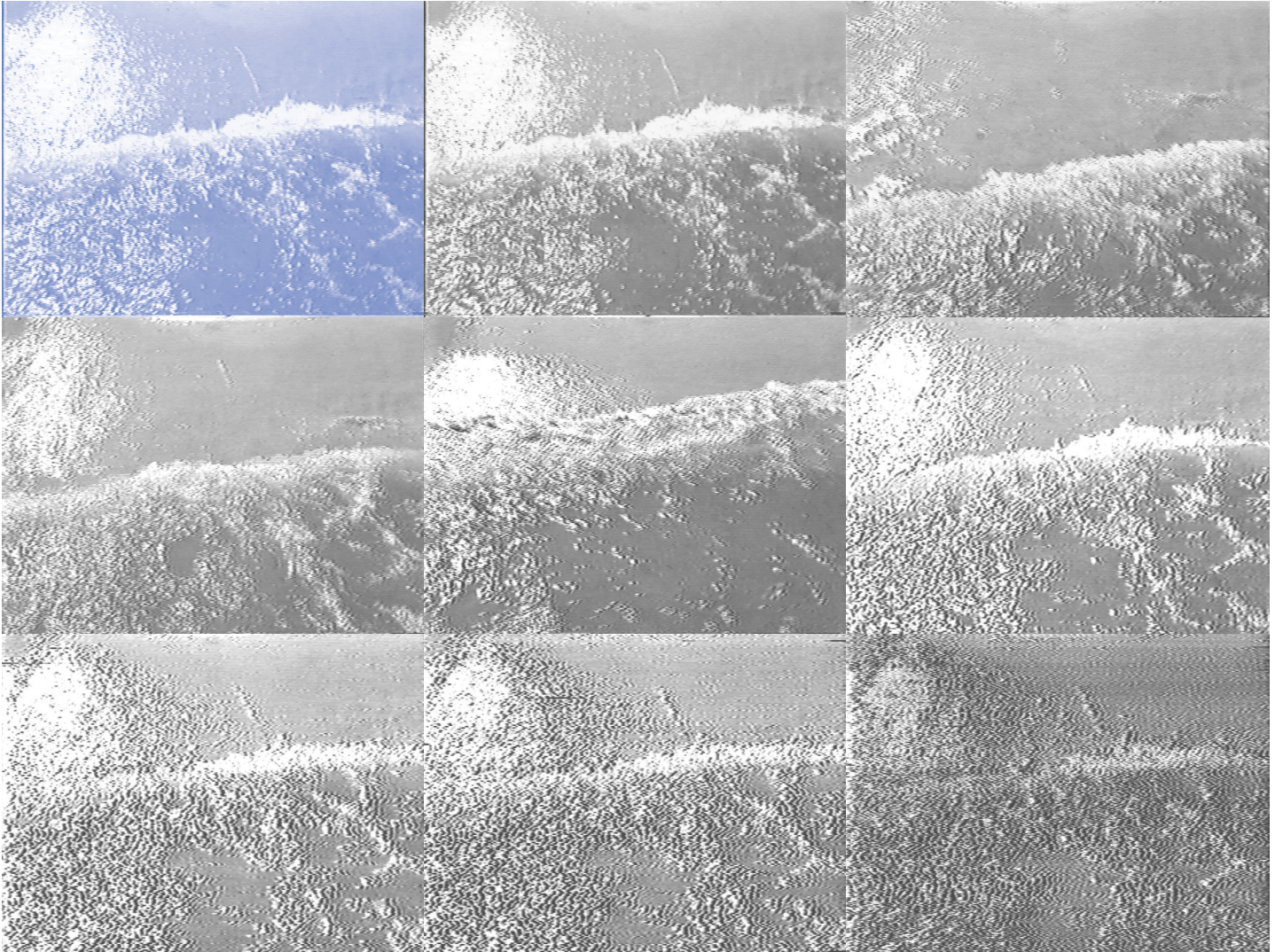
Image sequence from *Analog Tide* (2011), *Necropolis* installation excerpt

These personalities were hosted on the spacious big screen big sound of the cinema. However, the increasingly small, mobile screen defanged the visceral. In addition, the overwhelming amount of content creation renders the recordings disposable so that it is impossible to give any of it our full attention. We are constantly aware of the vast self-similar stories being told in our absence. The antidote, it would seem, is to convert the home into the theatre and thereby immerse ourselves, while maintaining the intimacy of our living room. With each innovation, we expand the borders of the screen until it is a secondary landscape, filling our entire field of view. Inevitably, we must step into it.

Crossing the threshold, we need to remind ourselves to be critical of these new simulations, particularly when our consciousness itself is a compromised blend of assumption and fact. The fiction extends to our biological hardware. The brain trusts the edit, because it is a mirror of the internal cut-up.

When we recall the day, it is neatly strung together from a series of disjointed artifacts. Dead space, blackouts and general discontinuity require our internal editor to provide surrogate memory, which recordings have graciously provided.

Even when standing still, we can supplement our memories and experiences. Through the visual and auditory, we participate in many spaces and times without moving. Telepresence is so much a part of our being that we scarcely treat it with any criticism at all. It is neither malevolent, nor benign. It simply is.

This artifice (this art) is so sophisticated and ingrained in our culture, it is impossible to separate ourselves from biased untruths and emotionally oversimplified mementos.

Video being time-based and archival means it is generally considered the format of rigid documentation, simply recording what is there and replaying it exactly. Tasked with the honest conveyance of the past, is the medium actually accountable to history and its accuracy? Or does it cloak fiction as fact using the aesthetic tricks of the trade, such as shooting-from-the-hip honesty and shaky-cam documentary. Eliminating gloss is a simple way to add believability. Inserting a bit of grit lends the air of spontaneity and immediacy.

Alternately, cinema plays out history grand gestures evoking emotional honesty. Take, for example, Joan of Arc. I was recently told by a Parisian friend that some doubt exists as to whether Joan ever existed at all. I found this totally unbelievable and impossible, because I have completely internalized the emotion of the story. To me, it is a historical fact that she existed, because I want her to. However, the re-telling of the story has certainly raised doubts in my mind about what actually happened. If the devil is in the details, then it is safe to say it has been thoroughly exorcised by modern cinema.

First we saw a silent film that mainly conveyed the story with close-ups and facial expressions, her feelings seemed knowable. Next, Joan's story was told with dialog-driven drama in which technicolour was the co-star. Then it was reverted to a black-and-white re-make, trusting that the lack of colour would provide the necessary somber, in spite of the lack of cohesion. The most recent version attempted to dazzle with a thunderous, ridiculous spectacle of cinematic gluttony. This is not a simple case of the telephone game, passing on a story from one person to another until imperfections erode the content. This is the machinery of industry, the laziness of writers, the inadequacies of audiences, and the general lack of focus of an entire society that strips a story of its value and reduces heroines to caricatures.

Stranger still is if we suspend our disbelief completely and accept that the recordings have a life of their own. What does it mean to manipulate these moments, these images? Stripping them of their narrative, puppeteering them on queue to cry, scream, tremble, and turn their gaze to a fixed point so that future Joan generations can look into the past and into the one inevitable event in all of their timelines: obliteration by fire.

The characters are trapped in a kind of timeless limbo, a perpetual reliving of an event. This is much the same as our culture, which is forever gazing backward through the recording, reliving events and fads, assuring us a permanent adolescence that strips us of a future.

Two screens face one and other. Within the screens, a new recombinant character emerges. True to say it's two people: one a middle-aged woman, Rachel, the other a young girl, Carol Anne. Separately, they both gaze into television screens, static reflected in their eyes. From within the static, the spirits of the dead, malevolent spirits meant to harm them, answer back.

Memorial (2011), *Necropolis* installation excerpt

Forever Endevour (2011), *Necropolis* installation excerpt

Their intense stare is slowed somewhat, suspending the moment of indecision. We sense trust and distrust, curiosity and revulsion, innocence and experience. Although authored by two separate people on opposite ends of the globe and at different times, the characters seem to have a continuity of their own regardless of when the cinema affords us a brief glimpse of their timelines. We begin with Carol Anne, and then with an absence, we return to Rachel, roughly 20 years later cinematically and age-wise. The resemblance is uncanny, the stories extremely similar. The fiction has become memetic and independent of our telling.

Our own position in time can be seen as forever central with our beginning and inevitable end receding into the past and future, much the same as two mirrors parallel to one and other imperfectly reflect the light captured between them. Charles Manson once said, "Eyes are cameras." And if that's true, he may have been aware of the imperfections in seeing and recalling what is recorded internally. Just as important is what is not recorded, the unseen, the things we miss, the events that we believe occur in our absence, outside of our gaze.

With the need to be seen growing in order to satisfy our crisis of being, our range of sight has come to define our involvement, a measure of our awareness in a visually saturated world. Black outs and blind spots are the last free autonomous zones of possibility where, as Hassan I Sabbah (Grandmaster of the Assassins) famously said: "Nothing is true, everything is permitted." Blinking is the little death and, like death, completely unavoidable.

Revisiting themes does not always lead to an inevitable erosion of content. In some instances, the attempt to portray the unportrayable can evolve in directions that still retain life and ingenuity. To take for instance the subject of oblivion itself, I once heard a story about the great god Pan being approached by a very wise king. The king had so much knowledge of worldly events that he decided all that was left was to comprehend the unworldly. Due to his vast resources and power, he was given audience with Pan and told he could ask any question. His request was simple: Make me understand the meaning of oblivion. Pan immediately responded by rendering the king dead. In response to accusations that he had cheated, Pan exclaimed, "I simply gave him the limit of human knowledge regarding the request. Only gods know oblivion. For humans, there is only death."

Stanley Kubrick portrayed the limits of understanding with a scene of pure abstraction in the climax of 2001: A Space Odyssey. This was followed by an equally psychedelic representation in Altered States when a scientist succeeds in cellular regression to a state of pre-existence. Finally, Gaspar Noe interpreted oblivion in the film Enter the Void, in which a young man taking a hit of DMT is treated to a kaleidoscopic journey into the near-death subconscious.

The technical progression of these representations moved from film compositing, single frame animation, liquid luminensce manipulation, and finally complex 3D computer graphics. In spite of these differences, the result is surprisingly compatible and strikingly similar. The void, itself, is the character that lives independent of fiction, with its own continuity, constantly evolving, constantly beyond our grasp and always inviting us to ask the question, "What is it?"

It seems that the only way to fully immerse ourselves in this riddle is to break the image, both literally and figuratively. To step beyond the screen and into utter darkness where the light behind our eyes can best convey the mystery that the art is so inadequate at portraying.

Tasman Richardson

In the present day, necromancy is more generally used as a term to describe the pretense of manipulation of death and the dead, often facilitated through the use of ritual magic or some other kind of occult ceremony.

edmund law (lead installer) stands in corridor to view *Pan* (2011), *Necropolis* installation excerpt

edmund law (lead installer) stands on ramp to view
Parsec (2011), *Necropolis* installation excerpt

IMAGE BREAKER

Tasman Richardson is an iconoclast, in the purist sense of the word. He has, with more than a decade's worth of pioneering experimental video practice, broken the image, and with that transgressed the medium. He is the image-breaker.

Video, in its quintessential two-dimensional form, is effectively imprisoned within the confines of its own ethereal existence, held hostage by the vicissitudes of technology, time and space. It is, in its de-materialized form, bound to convey an eclipsed reality. A visual field that is self-reflexive and encrypted with the suspension of belief.

Liberating the medium and subverting the message has long fortified Richardson's video practice. Irreverently envisioned to explore visual perception, the works probe the very nature of seeing. Propelled by the "cut-up" method conceived by Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs, Richardson applies a similar concept to break narrative in video. Cuts take place with rhythm, the sounds in each clip set according to both their visual and aural qualities. This digital editing technique encompasses sampled clips from a broad spectrum of popular culture layered with carefully constructed composites of symbols and signifiers. These elements are then compounded in pattern recognition and emotional tropes effectively deconstructing the recordings.

Richardson's practice critiques the video medium and the history of recordings. He is both an iconoclast and a visionary, challenging conventional visual beliefs and perceptions of seeing. His works can be seen as re-presenting a visual world that is built on a screened culture and a tele-present society. Reflecting on the medium, Richardson reveals the layers of mediation that alter and manipulate our perceptions. These

Close up view of the first row of televisions in
Analog Tide (2011), *Necropolis* installation excerpt

deeply imprinted visualizations are effigies to the death of the experiential.

Death culture enshrouds Richardson's perspective on the medium of video. The works evoke a contemporary necromancy summoning the manifestation of generational loss. And in communicating with these specters of the deceased, Richardson veils the apparitions in a prophetic mirror of timelessness. These transmissions signal the death of media in it's permutations of truth, and demarcate a realm where authenticity and subversion haunt a tenebrous requiem.

NECROPOLIS

Anticipating a drastic re-invention of the medium and provoked by the limitations of video's two-dimensional domain, Necropolis, Richardson's career manifesto, breaks the image barrier. It explodes video into a three-dimensional experience, creating a tangible real-world manifestation of the medium. Necropolis is more than the screen born signal emitted from a two-dimensional boxed plane. It extends beyond the confines of projection and cathode ray tubes, taking on the properties of sculpture and architecture. Necropolis consists of six contiguous video and new media installations that interlock in a precise order, each within its own context- and site-specific chamber, set within an enveloping super-structure purposely built to fully immerse and enclose the viewer in the presence of video. Upon entering Necropolis the viewer navigates a fixed path, controlled in pace and with measured contrasts in scale, through the structure, not unlike a video playback head. This immersive environment incarnates all the theory and experimentation of Richardson's practice to date and propels the medium through its altering state.

Shrouded in shadows, Necropolis' serpentine structure awaits the viewer. Standing at its threshold, in darkness, one's eyes adjust gradually to the static glow emanating from its gaping mouth. The trepidation is immediate, as uncertainty escalates and enfolds the viewer. Strewn across this entrance point are nine vintage television sets in various sizes and models. A path snakes between the televisions enticing the viewer to begin a journey into the unknown. Analog Tide, Necropolis' antechamber, radiates with the eroding transmissions of analog technology. Video waves crest and recede across this inclined entry point beckoning the viewer further into the darkness.
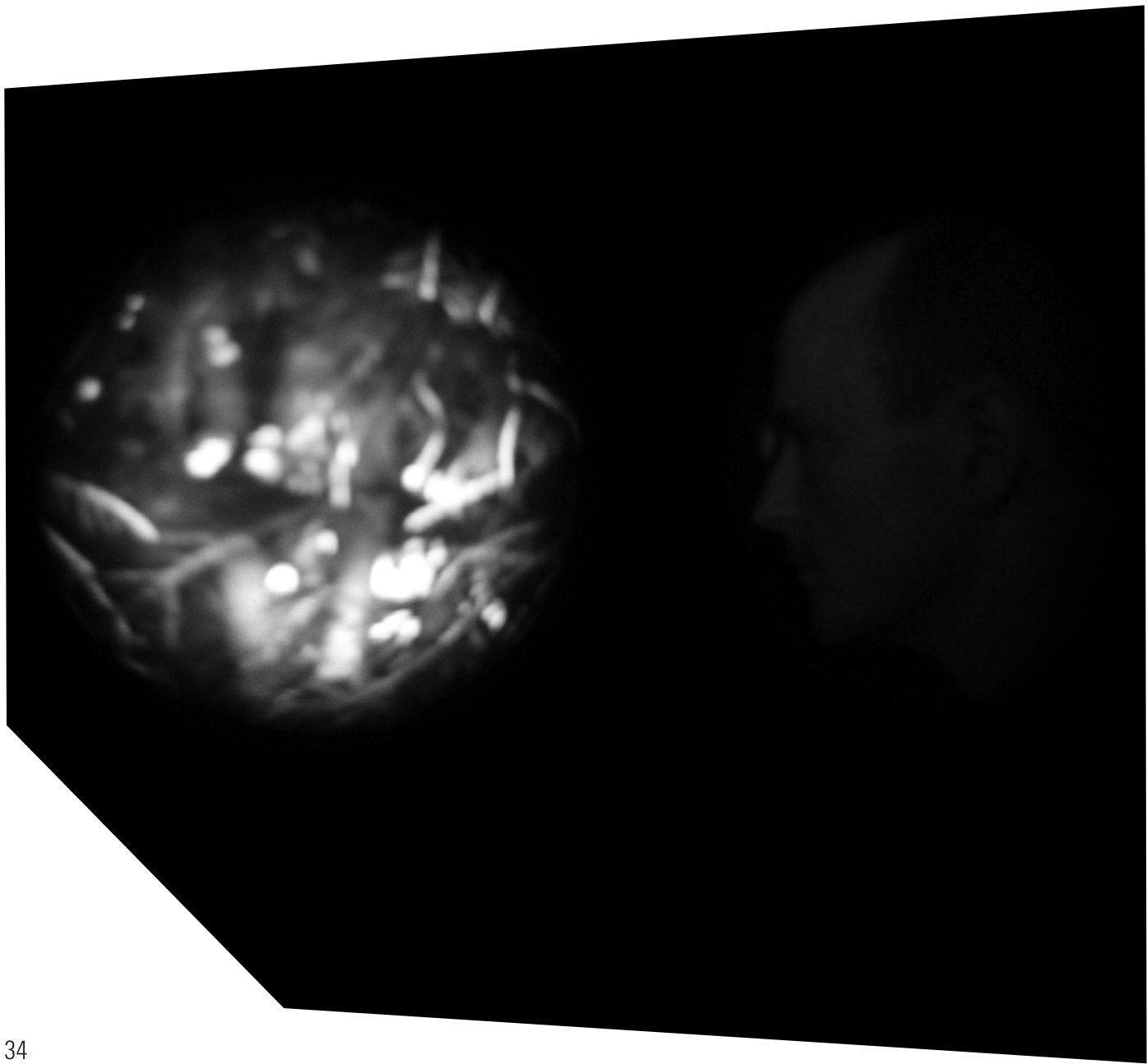
Lured on by oblique reflections of light intermittently guiding the way, the viewer continues to navigate Necropolis, as the floor levels off at a height of three feet narrowing into an angled corridor that leads to the Forever Endeavour.

This second chamber is compact yet infinite, with mirrors placed below and above the viewer. Two large box television sets face each other at eye-level to the viewer. Sampled clips from the films Poltergeist and The Ring flicker oracle-like, then cross-dissolve on each screen, effectively capturing the ghosts in the signal, mediated by the screen. The viewer reflected in the mirrors becomes a part of the tele-presence in this loop of media narcissism.

A few steps onwards the viewer stands between two projection screens at the top of a declining three foot ramp in a narrow passageway. Parsec, the third chamber, measures and shapes time using a video recording of light and sound generating a three-dimensional physical force within an accelerated dimension. Magnified dots of light appear on both screens moving in a horizontal line towards the viewer. The dots repeat, distort and accelerate, becoming a solid line of light, creating a Doppler effect. The sound generated by the speed of the light amplifies as it propels past the viewer in a sonic transmission.

The viewer then enters Memorial, the inner sanctum of Necropolis, where the visual field opens into a large cathedral-like chamber lit only by the luminosity of an eight foot circular rose window based on that of Notre Dame in Paris. Projected into each trefoil of the window are head and shoulder portrait moments from four films on the life of Joan of Arc. The films scan the history of cinema, radiating from the centre in chronological order, and include Carl Theodor Dreyer's silent classic 'The Passion of Joan of Arc' (1928) with Renee Falconetti, Victor Fleming's 'Joan of Arc' (1948) with Ingrid Bergman, Otto Preminger's 'Saint Joan' (1957) with Jean Seberg, and Luc Besson's 'The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc' (1999) with Milla Jovovich. The effect is transfixing, and like the candle at the core of the window, inflames the glorious agony of the martyrdom. Each projected moment emanates reverberating sound that has been carefully recorded and orchestrated for this installation. Memorial incarnates the loss of authenticity and truth inherent in the recordings, a generational loss, and compellingly laments and extinguishes our arrested idolatry.

Screens reflecting into each other and the mirrors above and below in *Forever Endeavour* (2011), *Necropolis* installation excerpt

Upon exiting the Memorial chamber, the viewer enters a dark angled corridor and is drawn to a light glowing from a small hole that eclipses the darkness. The hole conceals the fifth chamber, Blind Spot, a hidden recessed space immured within the walls of Necropolis. The hole is approximately the size of an eye, and reduces the optical scale drastically from Memorial's open vantage point to that of a single one-point perspective, narrow field of vision. In Blind Spot a video depicts a detail of a tree in the midst of a heavy wind blown snowfall. The viewer's gaze literally stops and starts the video when infra-red technology detects the blink of an eye. Blind Spot captures the optics of seeing, in effect measuring our visual perception.

Pan, the final chamber, places the viewer at the apex of two projection screens positioned parallel to each other, slightly converging at the opposite end, leaving a passageway for the viewer to walk through. Segments of Stanley Kubrick's '2001: A Space Odyssey' (1968), Ken Russell's 'Altered States' (1980) and Gaspar Noe's 'Enter the Void' (2009) are tightly edited into a euphoric state of deliverance. Each of the films addresses the concept of transcendence of body, space and time, and are braided together in a complex optical delirium. Pan immerses the viewer in oblivion and alters the scope of suspension, physically tunneling the viewer into the void.

Necropolis ends in a silent and twisting dark corridor. This terminus point is the final liberation zone, a dimension of visual and audio decompression, after which the viewer departs Necropolis. And like an Ouroboros, the viewer may return to the beginning and snake through Necropolis again and again, like an endless video feedback loop.

Rhonda Corvese
Curator

edmund law (lead installer) peers through a peephole to view *Blind Spot* (2011), *Necropolis* installation excerpt

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