

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Pursuit of a Shadow

By Jason Dee



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Dr Jason Dee
Name of Output:	Pursuit of a Shadow
UCARO link/s:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/3319/
Output Type:	M - Exhibition; solo exhibition
Year and mode of dissemination:	<i>Pursuit of a Shadow</i> exhibition, Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, UK, 31 May - 5 July 2014
Key Words:	Video, installation, zoetrope, digital, audio
Funding:	Talbot Rice gallery (with support from the Scottish Arts Council) funded the production of the installations

Synopsis

Pursuit of a Shadow was a solo exhibition by Dr Jason Dee which consisted of 9 audio-visual installations spread across 7 rooms throughout the Talbot Rice Gallery in Edinburgh.

The exhibition set out to explore how the fragmented layers and edges of cinema (normally hidden from view to create a stable viewing experience) could be revealed and used to examine how the analogue past is viewed through the digital present. The exhibition was filled with projections that overflowed their original frames. Screens were folded, torn or multiplied to create desynchronised gaps and shadows where twentieth century recordings could merge and interact with their ghostly twenty-first century renderings.

Screens played a central role in these installations as their presence highlighted the point where material plane meets ephemeral image, yet their distorted, fragmented form prevented complete immersion within the film world. They were ill-fitting, warped windows, but also objects that physically blocked projections, while also folding film

and viewing spaces into each other. By revealing how the disjointed edges of these worlds intersect and overlap these installations emphasised the warping of classic filmic space and time by digital viewing methods, opening up a new dialogue within which to explore the relationship between the supposedly obsolete and cutting-edge elements of cinema.

The gallery layout provided a wider frame within which to rethink these tensions and overlaps. Galleries introduce different viewing expectations compared to traditional cinemas that coincide with the shift towards the more flexible, autonomous consumption of audio-visual content via tablets and mobile phones. Corridors and stairwells between rooms were utilised to connect installations through the overspill of sounds and projected light, further blurring their boundaries.

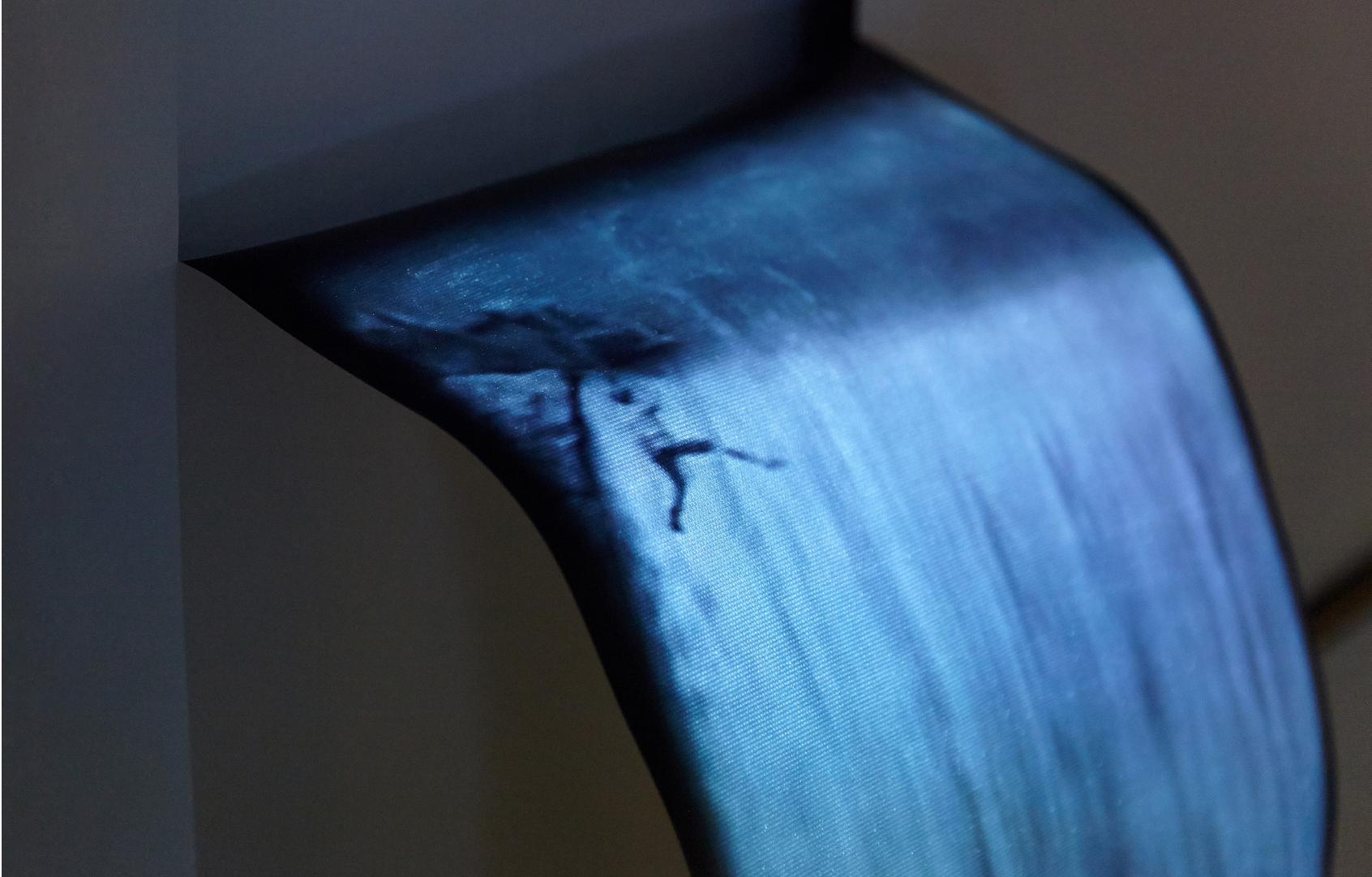
This portfolio includes evidence of the research aims, context and processes which led to new insights, and is illustrated throughout with images of the exhibition.



Gallery space including 'Dune' (front), 'Cataract' (left), and 'Light That Goes, Light That Returns' (back)



'Dune' detail



'Cataract' detail

Description of Works

‘24 Times’

24 monitors placed in a circle (resembling a zoetrope or looped strip of film) are digitally synchronised to play the same footage with a one-frame delay between each. Hundreds of film clips showing actors taking flash photographs are edited together to create a pulse of light that spins through the screens, simultaneously destroying and creating scenes.

‘Cataract’

In this installation the surface of a wall-mounted screen has been cut and the black reverse side pulled through. Onto this dark overhanging section is projected a looped video of Buster Keaton suspended on the edge of a waterfall.

‘First and Last Sounds’

A folded steel screen and multiple speakers create layers of audio/visual representation within a gallery space. On one surface a man calls out in an obvious studio depiction of the alps, randomly placed speakers ‘echo’ this call throughout the installation space, while on another folded surface a scene from the same film (*Goodbye Mr Chips*, 1939) shows actual

documentation of the alps. On the gallery wall behind, a simple mountainous silhouette is formed by the projected frame overspilling the screen’s irregular form.

‘Light That Goes, Light That Returns’

An onscreen figure (Eddie Constantine as an Orpheus-like character entering Godard’s electronic underworld in *Alphaville*, 1965) is frozen on a single frame. A swinging light-bulb casts shadows that partially reanimate him - capturing him between a fixed document of the past and a sentient subject occupying the present moment of a filmed space. On the wall behind, the screen’s shadow also follows the motion of the light-bulb projected onto its surface. The freestanding screen swings between being a window into the film space and a physical object within a gallery setting.

‘Vanishing Point’

This work uses the final scene from *The Third Man* (1949), when Anna walks away from the funeral of her lover (Harry Lime) and out of the frame, at which point the film itself comes to an end. In this looping digital reanimation Anna is forever caught between these two endings.

Description of Works

‘Intermission’

A film scene showing a character running down a staircase that ascends from Earth to Heaven (*A Matter of Life and Death*, 1946) is physically and digitally folded in on itself. The figure never reaches his destination, remaining trapped in limbo between the folds of the material world and the shadows of the afterlife.

‘Intermission II’

‘Intermission II’ acts as a sister work to ‘Intermission’. A projected frame contracts into and expands beyond a screen’s borders, following the rhythm of a breathing soundtrack. Breath here suggests a crossing of boundaries between the internal and external spaces of the body, film space and gallery. The unstable shifting of the projected frame across the boundaries of the screen in ‘Intermission II’ readdresses the relationship between the seen and unseen elements of cinema as revealed through the interplay between film, digital media, the projector, speakers, and the screen.

The screens of ‘Intermission’ and ‘Intermission II’ express external and internal forms of animation and rhythm: ‘Intermission I’ does this by folding the outside into its form, while in ‘Intermission II’ it is the projection itself that shifts in and out of the screen’s boundaries. In both these

examples the merger of mechanical and digital time is expressed by altering the spatial relationship between screen and image.

‘Dune’

This installation work incorporates a digitally altered and extended scene from *Woman in the Dunes* (Hiroshi Teshigahara, 1964) in which a man desperately attempts to escape from a sandpit. A sheet of curved steel acts as a screen, while also replicating the physical form that traps the figure.

‘Running Time’

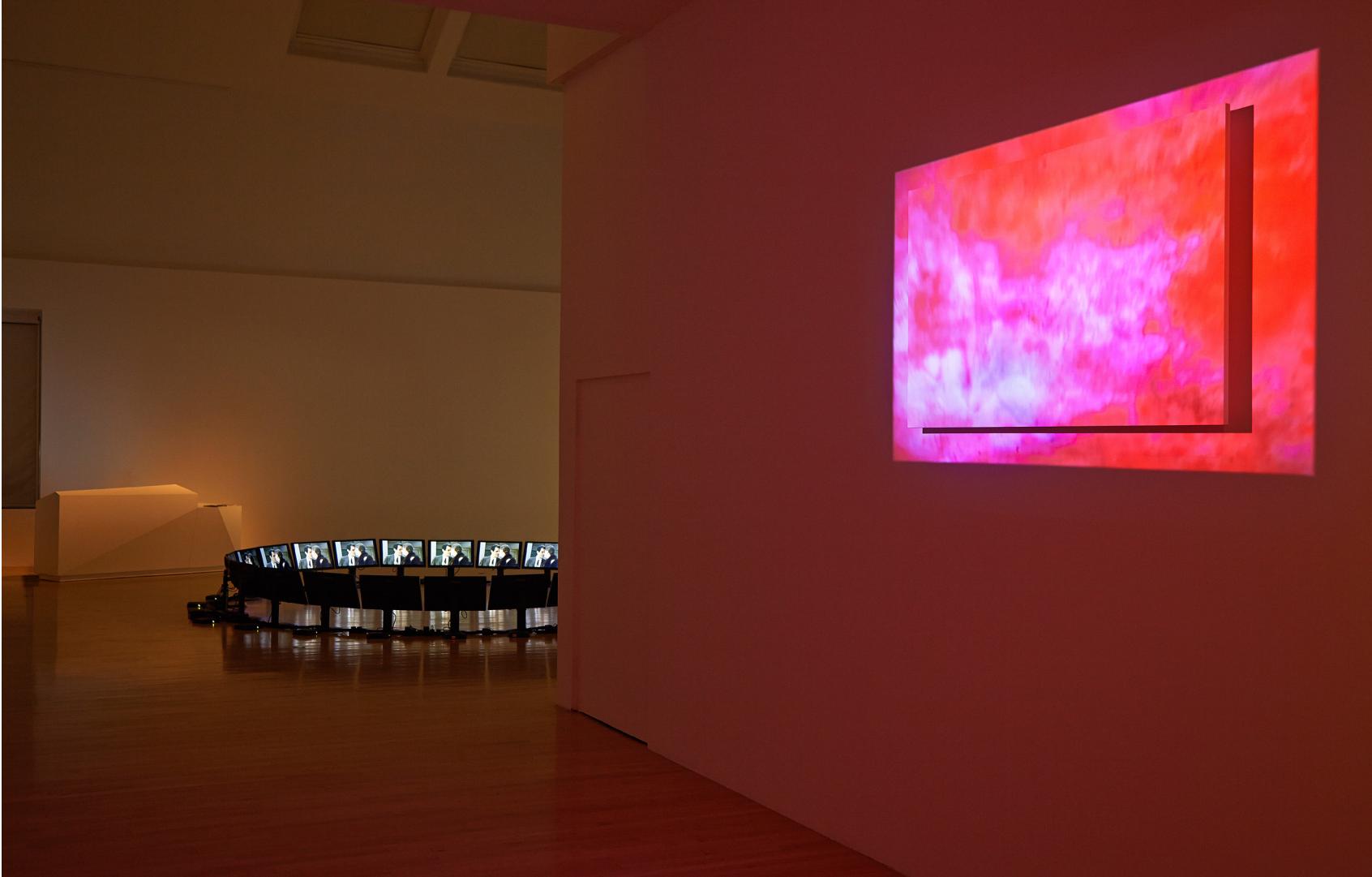
A relentlessly dramatic film score highlights the drama of a figure trying to outrun an unseen assailant, but it soon becomes obvious he is alone, and the music is an element of a film world he is attempting to escape. When this music (along with the spinning landscape) grinds to a halt the man easily escapes the frame, yet is unable to break free from the film world’s orbit. His disembodied footsteps can be heard running around the viewer who sits within an implied circle created by a curved screen. This shift from dramatic soundtrack to aimless footsteps opens up an alternative and absurd space within which the runner seems like a ghost circling a void opened by the removal of a storyline.



Gallery space featuring '24 Times'



'24 Times' detail



*'24 Times' (left) and 'Intermission II'
(right)*



'Intermission II'

Context

The transfer of analogue films to digital formats has redrawn the perceptual parameters between film-space, screen and viewing space. Dee's practice-led research explores how the spaces opened up by these shifting configurations can be utilized and explored as part of installation-based art projects that work between the 'black cube' of cinema and the 'white cube' of gallery spaces.

Laura Mulvey (2009) suggests a similar approach can be seen in the work of artist Mark Lewis. His films create a space where the physical and illusory qualities of a medium merge and distort into each other, creating their own sense of time and history. Not modernity's linear progress, nor the fragmentary explosion of post-modernity, but a more complex, layered and folded temporality.

Whereas Lewis uses obsolete technologies to reproduce and highlight the illusory nature of cinema, Dee's work uses software and installation spaces to reconfigure the analogue past within a digitally viewed present. By folding together these spaces, boundaries are shifted and distorted, revealing glimpses of alternative worlds, previously hidden around the edges of film's structure.

Cinematic narratives that once pulled the viewer into a film's space and time can now be broken down and analysed by digital viewing methods to reveal film's underlying structure. This removal of a film's flow distances old recordings from the moment of viewing by turning them into more clearly defined

documents of the past. When experienced this way media historian Wolfgang Ernst (2006:105) believes that 'the archive is traumatic, testimony not to a successful encounter with the past but to [...] the impossible bridging of a gap.' Yet, viewed from a different perspective, the past can now be seen in a new light, according to Eivind Rossaak (1999:334), as 'with its new digital technology, cinema can with greater ease than before pick up energies in the margins of the medium'.

Merging together elements of film and new media, Dee's practice works in the gaps and margins referred to in these quotations, searching for ways to renegotiate cinematic space and time. The ability to freeze a film's flow, or shift from frame to frame exposes the fragmented relationship between still and moving imagery, highlighting the significance of what occurs between frames.

REFERENCES

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Mulvey, L. (2009) *Mark Lewis: The Mirage Behind the Movie Star*. In: *Modern Painters*. New York.

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Research Questions and Aims

Research questions:

The transfer of analogue films to digital formats has redrawn the perceptual parameters between film-space, screen and viewing space, prompting the questions:

How can these shifting configurations be utilized and explored as part of an art practice?

How are memory and perception (social and individual) altered by this shift?

Research aims:

To open up new ways of considering the shift between different technological forms of representing motion

To reveal the gaps and edges of media, and how these overlaps with other forms allow these spaces to be utilised and developed as part of new creative outputs

Research Methods and Processes

Although this exhibition was not directly connected, much of the research and processes of discovery for this work were undertaken during Dee's practice-led Fine Art PhD at Newcastle University, which had the title: 'Out of Body Experiences: A practice-led evaluation of the shifting boundaries shared by analogue films and their digital counterparts'.

During this period Dee immersed himself in both traditional and contemporary film culture. He researched the history of film - from its fairground origins, the 20th century industrial fixing of rules regarding film language and presentation, to the shift towards digital forms of disseminating audio-visual material. Alongside this Dee also researched the historic and theoretical aspects of film/video art and its presentation within the gallery format.

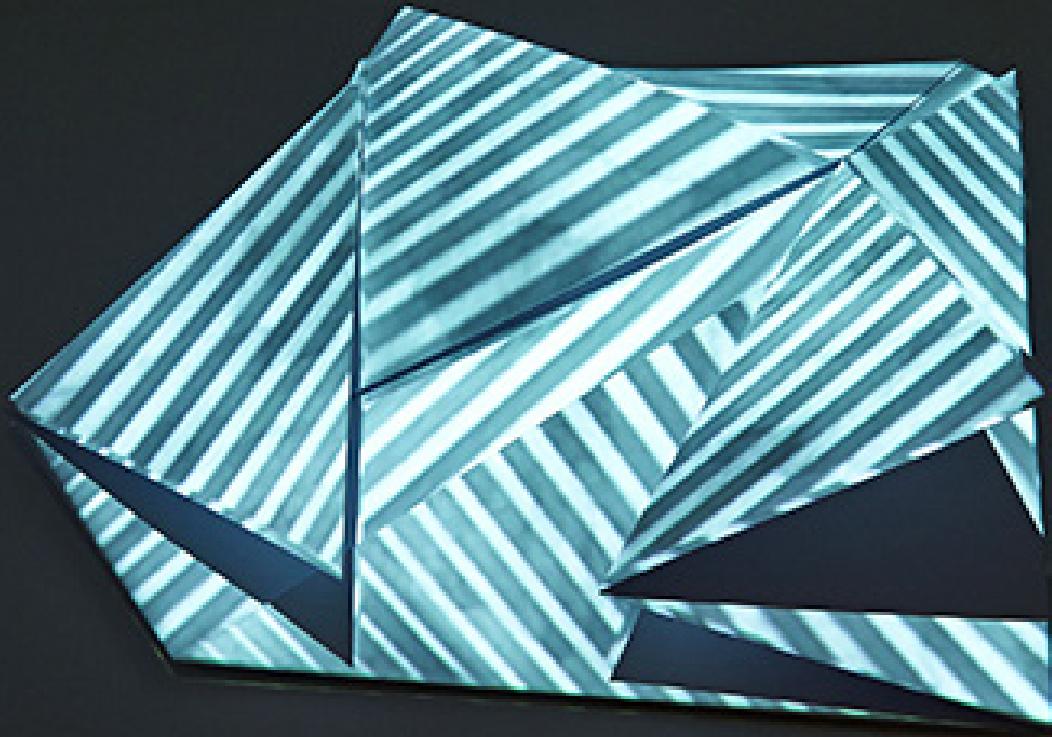
During Dee's practice-led research short scenes from 20th century films were pulled out and separated from their original narrative timelines. Digital software was then used to distort and fragment these film clips, often trapping onscreen figures within endlessly looping landscapes. Sculptural screens and digital hardware were then used to contain these scenes, which also often spilled over to occupy gallery walls, blurring the boundary between film and viewing spaces. Dee therefore used methods normally found in fine-art film production and installation to explore the shift from traditional methods of displaying films (darkened cinema, fixed projector/screen and immobile audience) to more fluid and autonomous viewing methods associated with digital viewing.

For example, Dee's exhibition *Pursuit of a Shadow* included

the installation '24 Times', which uses both digital hardware and sculptural installation techniques to explore the qualities of film's physical structure. These two approaches unleash the kinetic energy of film by removing the constraints of the single cinema screen, spreading its mechanical motion out across multiple monitors, allowing viewers to see the gaps between frames that enable the animation of frozen images. This way of seeing pulls cinema full circle back to early experimentations into representing motion, where viewers (by spinning a device such as a zoetrope) were active participants, hovering between surrendering to and awareness of the illusion they created.

Similarly, 'Cataract' looped and extended an old film clip containing 'Buster Keaton' dangling from a waterfall. By cutting a strip from a projector screen and pulling it through its frame Dee created a sculptural representation of the waterfall that was then projected onto it, giving the appearance that the water was flowing through the screen and into the gallery space. By making the screen's unseen surface spill through in this way, an alternative and chaotic element of film is suggested: the contingent, unintentionally captured energies underlying film narrative, the complexity of information stored within each frame, and the infinite connections formed in the interstices between film frames. 'Cataract' explores this relationship between the material elements of cinema and the transformative energies that flow across and beneath their surface.

Pursuit of a Shadow brought these, along with numerous other installation works, together to create an immersive, walk through environment, with no clearly defined beginnings or ends, and no prescribed method of viewing.



'Intermission I'



'First and Last Sounds' detail



'Vanishing Point'

Research Contribution and Recognition

Research insights and contribution:

This research revealed the disjointed gaps existing between the multi-media found in cinema. Practice-led exploration revealed the creative potentials of utilising these spaces within gallery settings, opening up new considerations of sights and sounds recorded with analogue technology in the twentieth century and then transferred to twenty-first century media.

The main purpose of '24 Times', for example, was to reveal and release cinema's kinetic energy. The blast of light from the flashguns spun around the circle of monitors as expected, but unexpected elements included the sound created by 24 monitors playing the same soundtrack with one frame difference to each adjacent screen. This created a firecracker energy that lifted the work considerably. The flashing light sent the shadows of the audience spinning around the gallery walls, creating another layer to the work.

Dissemination:

This was a large-scale exhibition at one of Edinburgh's biggest galleries. Talbot Rice is within the grounds of Edinburgh University and has a large footfall.

Dee gave a TV interview about the exhibition (<https://www.artinscotland.tv/2014/jason-dee-pursuit-of-a-shadow/>) as well as an artist talk chaired by John Calcutt (Head of MFA at Glasgow School of Art).

Total daily figures: 1,564
Events attendance: 418
TOTAL: 1,982

Research Contribution and Recognition

Follow-on-activities:

'24 Times' was shown at *The Still Point of the Turning World – Between Film and Photography*, a large-scale exhibition based in FOMU (Photo Museum of Antwerp), the largest museum dedicated to photography in Belgium. The exhibition ran for over 3 months. This show was accompanied by a 256 page book with written contributions from David Company, Joachim Naudts and Elviera Velghe. There were a number of talks linked to the show. Dee was invited to give a talk alongside the gallery's head curator Joachim Naudts (<https://research.uca.ac.uk/3785/>).

'Cataract' was shown at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, as part of the *Nuts & Bolts* exhibition, Het Atelier, Rotterdam, Netherlands, 26 January - 4 February 2017 (<https://research.uca.ac.uk/3320/>).

On completion of this exhibition Dee was invited to show his work as part of *Etcetera V*, at The Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art, Ghent, 2017.

Influence of research:

After the exhibition a paper was written by Bram Van Beek as part of the MA Program 'Film and Photographic studies' at Leiden University, Belgium, 'Knighting Jason Dee: 24 Times through the writing of the late Rosalind Krauss'.

The paper connected '24 Times' 'to the late writings of Rosalind Krauss on medium specificity [in an effort to] determine whether this work, generally considered as an installation, falls under what Krauss calls "the post-medium condition" or whether it resists this tendency to dissolve the medium'. The paper concluded 'that, rather than abandoning the medium altogether, Dee finds a non-reductive way of "pointing-to-it", which would make him a "knight of the medium"'.



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'First and Last Sounds'

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