

Michele Whiting

Abstract: My research investigates how and in what ways specific sites are used as subject through contemporary moving-image installation art practice: interrogating through the combinations of theory and practice how and in what ways artists use site as image subject. In this way, visual findings, discoveries and questions emerge from practice and are examined through practice alongside examining other contemporary works. I engage with strategies and tactics used by selected artists, both contemporary (shown in the U.K. between 2002 -2008) and historical. Through first hand experience, visual analysis and artist and gallerist interviews, the discussion moves across time, drawing upon selected works from moving image's short but vibrant history, revealing commonalities across both works and time that are further investigated through critical discussion. Notions of site, place and space are also critically examined and relevant theoretical approaches are employed to consider the works beyond the mimetic image, beyond depiction. It is the very event of the work and my personal encounter with it - through practice and through other artists' works - that forms the basis of my analysis.

Negotiations in Hollow Space.

In the dark expanse of the gallery, a four sided rectangular shape hovers in mid-space. Light spills onto it by way of four projectors that also describe the architecture of the room in the grey of the light emissions.

The moving-images that illuminate the suspended image/object show a rural landscape and a house that sits in a geographic hollow seen from the cardinal points of four camera positions. The four screens and eight channels of sound have an aesthetic and architectural relationship to each other and yet each remains an independent unit. The positioning of the four screens into a box-like construction suspended in mid-space, requires the viewer to move away from filmic references to begin to sense the place at its own given values.



Hollow, (2008). 28' four channel video installation. B.S.A.D. Project Space. Bath Spa University. 2008. Michele Whiting.

To fully view the image/object is to move across each screen and around the corners - demanding physical action from the viewer - which echoes the movement required to traverse the actual topology of the original site of filming.

It is in this fractional moment or 'interval' that everything alters and the ambulatory viewer becomes aware of their own capacities as editor. Each viewing, each 'completion' of the work is unique, the variations of completion remaining limitless and open. This said the installation of this work, entitled 'Hollow', remains highly sensitive to the gallery space, by its very nature fluid, changeable, yet dependent on the architecture of its environment.

Before the Hollow

The unfolding of the story of Hollow's production, demonstrates some of the many ways in which site-oriented moving-image based artists, may set out to establish limits in an unoccupied 'open' site through reflexive praxis.

In a practical sense, understanding 'openness' stems from comprehending specificities of site as being made up of unanchored flows of information,¹ indicating how space relates and interrelates with how people move through it locally, how they consume space - not just in actuality but also imaginatively.

Cultural geographer Irit Rogof explains that there has been a shift in art practice beyond a simple reading of everything being in relation to everything else. She cites Francis Alys' moving-image work "Zocalo, May 20 1999" as a work that takes a specific site and '...dissolves it beyond the subject...' it's concerns becoming greater than the original location, superseding the representation of the central subject (site) through practice-methods of duration and framing. Thus she intimates a conceptual space born out of understanding '...fluent conjunctions of space and time...' perhaps as a strategy of arts' production.²

This indicates a process of negotiation on the part of the artist to move beyond perception and affection, to use conjunctive space/time as planes of material - in the same way that a painter would use paint - to produce moving-image works through which sensation capable of lasting beyond the image and power source (that it relies on to be seen) may begin to be asserted.

In this text, site used as image-subject in moving-image installation manifests with vital shifting boundaries (real or imagined) manipulated by the artist.³ It is suspended

¹ Kwon, M., 2002, *One Place After Another. Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, The MIT Press.

² This paper was originally written in 2006 but I was reminded of it at a Brighton University conference; *Occupations: Negotiations with Constructed Space*, Thursday 2nd July 2009, where I gave a paper, and Irit Rogoff was keynote speaker, re-delivering this Paper *The Where of Now*. It can also be found at <http://www.kein.org/node/64> retrieved September 2nd 2009. *Zocalo May 20 1999* was shown as part of *Time Zones* (2004 Tate Modern) it captures twelve hours of unedited footage in Mexico City's Central Plaza. It has its historical roots in Chris Markers' *Le Joli Mai* (1962.)

³ Deleuze and Guattari in 'What is Philosophy?' insist on painting, sculpting, composition and writing as artistic activities that can be achieved with sensation, but makes no mention of

in a state of ongoing displacement; a site of contest, always problematic and offering metonymic spatial configurations which allows itself, as geographer Doreen Massey⁴ (akin to Rogoff) suggests, to be embraced by the artist. In testing art's ability to make visible and audible what remains unseen and unheard, sensation is sustained as lived experience - as 'being'; a sensation ultimately experienced by the viewer in the new site of installation.⁵

If Rogoff assumes a position of understanding site's complexities as fluid conjunctive space/time that can be conceptually and contiguously negotiated locally, then the way that we, as artists, approach site-oriented moving-image installations, exceeds a re-invigoration or re-imagining of site, seeking and pursuing an understanding that may go beyond that which is readily apparent.

This paper explores how, and in what ways, an artist occupies site as moving-image subject as the plane of material, seeking to exceed material and bring the work into an area of sensation beyond mere representation of place. Site's occupation - both imagined and real - is recounted through revealing the heat and struggle of an art process through which occupation may be seen as a constituent of moving-image installation art practice

Hollowness

At the centre of this story of production lies a geographic hollow, wherein two adjoining farm cottages built in the early 1900's lie. The cottages (until the interwar years) had been part of a larger working farm on the edge of Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire. The site, which occupies a sensitive area, is active, evidenced by the litter of empty shell cases on the ground.

photography, moving image or documentation. Deleuze Gilles, Guattari Felix. Trans Tomlinson J. Burchell G. 1994 *What is Philosophy*, New York, Chichester West Sussex, Columbia University Press.p469

⁴ Massey, D., 2005, *For Space*, Singapore, New Delhi, California, London: Sage Publications.

⁵ See also Kwon, M., 2002, *One Place After Another. Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press.



Site View, Salisbury Plain, spring, 2007. Michele Whiting.

I happened upon this place by chance. Over time I revisited many times, saw seasons come and go, and watched and waited from a distance to try to understand the contradictory and complex nature of this place. Cutting through this reverie, I re-read Edward Soja's text which asserts a 'Thirdspace', an 'aleph-like' space where all and nothing, here and there, then and now, happen in simultaneity.⁶ It is at this point that my artistic engagement with the site began.

In Borges' short story,⁷ as in Soja's reading of it, *The Aleph* is a fictional point in space that holds in its grasp all other points and counterpoints. Anyone who looks upon *The Aleph* sees all simultaneously, without distortion.

There is resonance with the site of this text through comprehending the myriad counter-positions found within it: safe versus danger, fertile versus barren, empty versus full and vice versa.

To clarify a Thirdspace perspective, Soja determines that it is built on a 'creative recombination and extension' of Firstspace as the material or 'real' perspective, and

⁶ Soja Edward.W.1996 *Thirdspace:Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and Imagined Places*. MA USA,Oxford.U.K. Victoria, Australia. Blackwell Publishing

⁷ Borges J.,L., Trans Hurley A. 2000. *The Aleph and Other Short Stories*. London.Penguin Books Ltd.

Secondspace as the imagined representation of spatiality beyond the material.⁸
Thirdspace therefore emerges as all, while exceeding all simultaneously.

Soja's text on Thirdspace, employs the literary notion of *The Aleph* to offer a way forward from the self registered binary unease of Henri Lefebvre's 'Production of Space' and its recognition of 'other space,' in order to transgress across real and imagined space, thus encountering a space of 'extraordinary openness' without privileging one thing over another but all existing in simultaneity.⁹

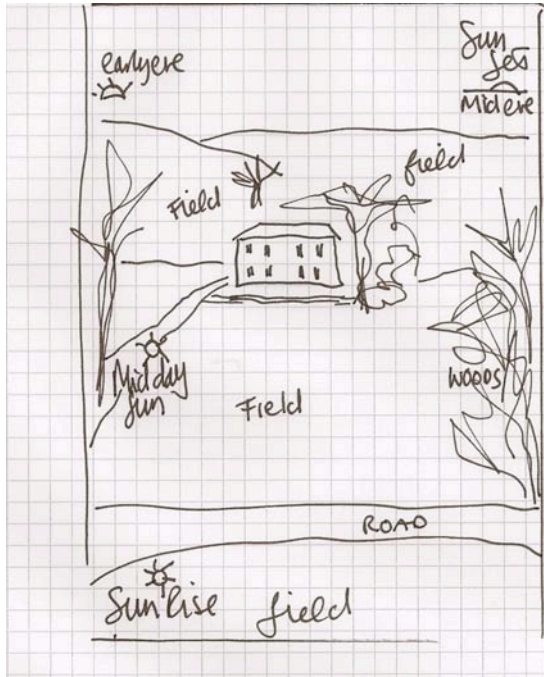
In art process terms, a Thirdspace perspective may arguably offer a way forward that opens up spatial imagination - not through dismissing any theoretical criticality that may have gone before, but by offering a different perspective through spatial thinking and spatial imagination. In this way site's habitation may be witnessed as a practical engagement with fluid multiple streams of perceptual information: A space of radical openness.

About the Hollow

The topography of the site of this text is a hollow. As such the boundaries are implicit. The sides of the hollow are fields rising and falling in a lip at the heights of their undulations. The base of the hollow holds the house. To the forefront lies a field. A hill rises behind as well as to the left side. To the right is a wood. The site is formed by these natural boundaries.

⁸ Soja Edward.W.1996. *Thirdspace:Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and Imagined Places*. Blackwell Publishing. MA USA,Oxford.U.K. Victoria, Australia. p5.

⁹ Lefebvre H. trans Nicholson-Smith Donald. 1991. *Production of Space*. Oxford. Blackwell Publishing.



Site sketch, 2007. Michele Whiting.

The site's commonplace topographic properties satisfy a primitive human instinct to settle, to be in. However, when the uncompromising 'bunker-like' nature of the house is taken into account, or when the bricked up windows, replaced roof, and missing doorways are witnessed, a metaphorical reversal of 'house' is caused. The sensation subverts notions of security and domesticity, for this site can never be safe or comfortable.

Gaston Bachelard notes that 'if we have gone beyond merely assembling exact recollections, bit by bit the house that was lost in the mists of time will appear from out the shadows.'¹⁰ Thus shards of sensual memory reconnect each of us to that fundamental sense of belonging. Feelings and fragments of images come to the fore, and un-bidden at moments of estrangement, return our unique view of "home" back to us.

Prompted by familiar associations, this house and site return "home" to the visitor. The very idea of home, according to geographer Tuan¹¹ is not only a familiar place, but also a rich, shadowy, explorative space where liminality is normative, where

¹⁰ Bachelard G., 1994. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston, Massachusetts. Beacon Press P57

¹¹ Tuan Yi-Fu. 2004 . *Place, Art, and Self*. Center for American Places. Sante Fe, New Mexico.p40.

imagination rules over the rational which casts its considerable, uncomfortable shadow across the terrain of both this site and moving-image.

This house and site is now a site of warfare and dominance. The topographical location has become dangerous. Warning signs replace name signs. Bricks replace curtains, and any notions of a rose-covered country cottage are shattered. Both house and site is bound and un-bound, a problematic condition brought about by a metaphorical implosion in space, time and event. Nothing is everything and everything means nothing.

In Jorge Luis Borges' story, Daneri's house functions as a container for *The Aleph* that resides in its cellar. The very notion of encasing infinity in the cellar - giving infinity a boundary - is somehow satisfying. In mathematics, an aleph number denotes the cardinality of infinite sizes, delimiting the infinite into a quantifiable, graspable shape. Both of these notions relate to the aforementioned multiplicities of the site. If *The Aleph* in the cellar is an infinite being delimited into a sizable and manageable shape, then it seems reasonable to suggest that the fluid variable relations found in the site of this text might be (not just) understood and contained, but also visually consumed.

Inhabiting the Hollow.

Returning to the site, it folded back to envelope me as a vague, imagined, boundary-less state, evoking notions of loss and anxiety made profound by its isolation. In my response as an artist/witness, I learned about the site's histories, realised the affects of light, seasons, the visceral qualities of the site and house, and became witness to my own aleph.

The idea of this army site as an aleph-like space remained embedded, as did the phrases 'all and nothing', 'here and there', 'then and now'. I sensed that in order to fully experience and engage with the site's vast presence, I would need to observe how others responded to it, to examine how it might be re-inhabited through performance. I decided to position myself as a go between to negotiate the multiple space of the production until a consensual state could be reached.

Emerging from these thought processes, I asked two performance artists to encounter and respond to the space: Belfast born Laura Wilson, and West country-based Peter Assirati. Laura Wilson has her familial roots in Northern Ireland ('the troubles'), and Peter Assirati has strong familial history with the East End of London ('the Blitz'), thus tacitly engaging with the military history of the house through both artists.

I issued both artists with photographs and details of the location, and gave a date and a time when we would film. My brief - as befits the state of the site - was open. The only instructions were that at the time of the shoot they should ignore each other, make no comment to each other either physically or verbally, thus leaving their performances autonomous and open.

In the spatial exchange that would follow, my hope was that the image would be realised as a dialectic between what is perceived - memory and reality enacted through performance and thus suggesting a 'radically open perspective' - one that would tolerate an open approach to film-making such as the use of ambient sound, natural light and a tendency towards coincidence.¹² This would be explored contiguously with the two performance artists' simultaneous responses.

In this way dynamics witnessed in the conjunctive performances would further site's spatial investigation, claiming strength from each other (as Gaston Bachelard claimed would happen) when two poetic images that are realised from separate dreams appear to gain strength from each other.¹³ My aim was that the moving images of the two separate performances would appear across the screens as a process of doubling through space. In this way they would begin to delimit the anarchic space of imagination and gain from each other as images,¹⁴ losing any gratuitousness in this mutual process.

Observing the site over time, I decided that mid spring at twilight would be optimum for the shoot: a strange crepuscular space/time between sunset and darkness, when

¹² Resonant with The Italian Neo-Realists who developed a film thematic that explored the marginalised, poor working class conditions of post-war Italy, emphasising the emotional over the abstract. It evolved in the late 1940's maturing in the early 1950's, and includes early works of Federico Fellini and Roberto Rossellini.

¹³ Bachelard G., 1994. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston, Massachusetts. Beacon Press. p59.

¹⁴ Bachelard G., 1994. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston, Massachusetts. Beacon Press. p59.

the failing light would illuminate the buildings just sufficiently to encounter them as a domestic space.

I placed four cameras across six acres: north, south, east and west, carefully framing the house. The strategic positioning of the cameras would be crucial to the future edit, which would cut across all four frames simultaneously. The light across the site was uneven because of the topological variations. The camera distances to the house - cast as central protagonist of the work - were varied, and once in position, 'locked off'.¹⁵

The decision to film with a fixed point of view stemmed from understanding the filmmaker's dilemma of unification. Locking off allowed me as an artist to make a strategic choice. Experience told me that four streams of images would be more easily assembled by laying down a few fixed markers in the heart of the process; in other words to begin to delimit the open, fluid and unstable terrain from within.

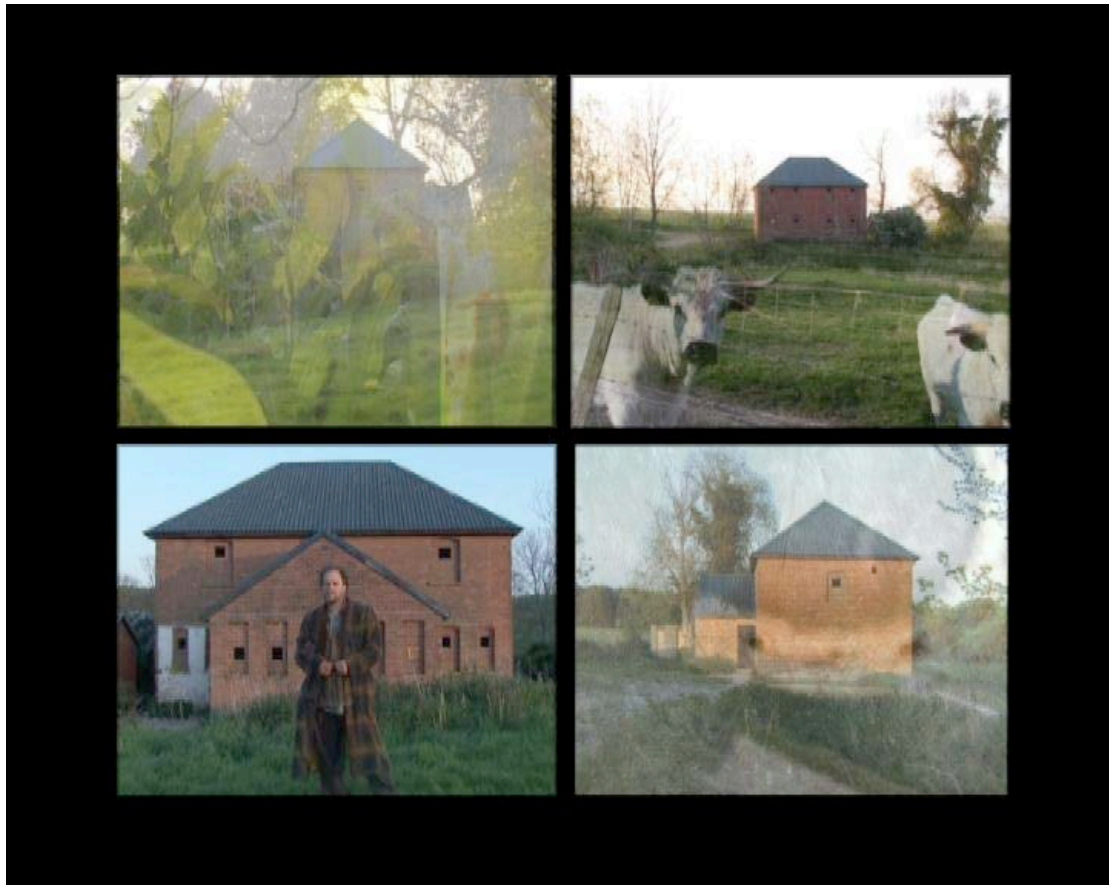
The hour came and the artists took up their mutually agreed positions. The position of the cameras dictated that Peter could be seen entering over the lip of the back hill in the front camera, and Laura could be seen entering from the right on the back camera.

The artists approached the performance in two distinct ways.

Peter Assirati spoke directly to the back camera, using the space as a stage, moving from time to time across the site drawing again the posterior dormant pathways.

Peter assumed a reflective role. The recollections may have been real or fictive. He could have been himself or playing the role of someone else in history. He arrives, assumes his role, returning again and again to centre stage to tell us (the viewer) another part of his fractured story. The narrative details don't matter. They merely act to isolate the house as a space of event, a repository of possible histories. His anecdotes have happened to all of us, and that is his real point. It is all and nothing. House and homeland are simultaneously all and nothing.

¹⁵ To lock off a camera in effect fixes the framing of the image, thus the movement happens within a fixed frame. Artist Susan Trangmar often succinctly refers to this procedure as a durational still.



Split screen edit still. 2008. Michele Whiting.

Laura Wilson moves across the frame of the front camera and, carrying a rucksack, walks up the front path towards the house as though a homecoming. Inspecting the windows, she chooses one, unpacks her rucksack, spilling multi-coloured balls onto the grassy knoll at the side of the house. She repetitively throws the balls, aiming to navigate them through the aperture.

The scrutinising 'eye' of the fixed point of view lens indicates space outside of the frame, space that the performers activate as they cross its threshold moments before they enter into another frame. Thus the site continues to be mapped across the spatial divide as well as within the single image by the bodies inscribing it.¹⁶

¹⁶ In reference to the single image, this technique was poetically pursued by experimental film maker, Margaret Tait in her 1952 film, *Portrait of Ga.* 4.30 mins, colour.



Split screen edit still. 2008. Michele Whiting.

Because of the use of the durational fixed point of view camera work, the repetitive movement of the performance becomes a point of focus. Laura became enigmatic, moving rhythmically, producing repetitive actions across the space of the site. In this twilight zone, the house and its paths are labored and re-defined. They have become domestic once-again, re-ordered through performance, enabling the re-emergence of a domestic reading of the building. Reclamation has begun and the restless flux of the site begins to settle into the twilight.

In filming in the hollow, the lack of light dictated the end of the performance, and filming was cut. Although this was a definitive point in the production of the work, it also proved to be a point of reflexive clarity. Video's materiality provides an opportunity for reflexivity, defined by an ability to stretch, compress, and reverse image fields; processes that Yvonne Spielmann notes are akin to language, to literature, to poetry. Video's pliability and complexity produces a language characterised by its formal property as being 'wheels within wheels within wheels'. Its infinite variations define its nature, producing reflexive actions to mediate its

composure. I used the documented performances as found footage, evoking a sense of discovery through its compositional as well as its pliable conceptual use.¹⁷

I play all the footage forward, and I recognize—that the moving-image with its four congruent segments is incomplete. I am implicated but I am missing. I have negated myself from the process of being fully immersed in trying to grasp *The Aleph*. I return to the site with one camera, 'venturing forth into the unfamiliar, experimenting with the uncertain and at all times - so pertinent to this site - the elusive'.¹⁸

Remaining in the hollow...

Responding to the 'openness' of the site has released something else. Reflexivity has prompted me to look again at the site, to see it afresh. I film, concentrating on the debris of the site. I return yet again. I have been watching and waiting. The maize is high in the front field, and I use my camera as an extension of my body, brushing through, feeling the sinewy rough quality of the plants against the camera. Through the introduction of camera movement, I (re)instate myself as a quiet subtext to the moving-image.

Back in the edit suite, I overlay the new images across the footage of the camera that was situated at the edge of the woods. This creates a contrast between the proximate images of the corn and the proximate space of the site, becoming causal to the whole edit. Images retreat and venture forth but the journey through the maize continues.

The internal rhythms of the four image planes are such that they are never allowed to settle. Video's syntactical principles can be understood in this instance as a sequential overlaying of one set of sign systems over another, image and audio merged together to originate divergent internal rhythms - however dissonant they may be.

The concept of a 'Thirdspace' removed any necessity to construct a narrative, which could and would define the site through language alone. I accepted that this work would become an experimental, discursive engagement.

¹⁷ Spielmann Y, 2008. *Video The Reflexive Medium*. Cambridge Massachusetts, London, England. MIT Press p191

¹⁸ Tuan Yi-Fu, 1977, *Space and Place*. Minneapolis and London. University of Minnesota Press.p9.

Can *The Aleph* be contained in the cellar as Borges suggests?

The process of installing the film as an artwork in the context of a gallery space frames the edit choices. Now, with six streams of film, a simultaneous edit begins across four screens. At this point I began to re-admit the viewer back into this collaborative process, imagining the work as completed experientially by the viewer. Returning to Borges' story, I saw (in the same way as his narrator saw) 'millions of acts... none of them occupying the same point in space, and without overlapping or transparency. What beheld my eye was simultaneous'¹⁹ and what I edited then, though simultaneous, was also successive, because the materiality of video is successive as language is successive. Therefore, the selection of sequencing images became lesser in this successive situation (whereas sequence was paramount within shadow theatres and lantern shows, early practices that paved the way for film makers/editors).²⁰ In this particular situation, time was prioritised over the sequential edit, and simultaneity became internal to the structure of the moving-image.

The importance of understanding editing as a language equates with this explanation of process as never being fixed. Intention can be radically different from an outcome unless practiced. The meaning of words produces intentionality to the reader, as an editing point determines the reception of the work to the viewer. The editor controls the pace, timing and impact of the visual. The moving-image lies within the editors grasp, like the pen in the writer's hand. Communication is culture, and editing - viewed as an utterance - may be considered in this same way.

In the edit of this production story, the image compositions of the four screens are produced by insertions of image overlaying image, audio overlaying audio. They are treated as found images. They are cut, copied and re-inserted. The audio is replicated, overlaid, distorted and enhanced. Narrative is fractured and incomplete, and successive images are slowed down, speeded up and mirrored. Through this process the site as subject becomes de-centered. The space internal to the image planes presents itself as hovering between imagined and actual, between fictive and authentic. The moving-image now exists as four image frames ready to be installed.

¹⁹ Borges J. L. Trans Hurley A. 2000. *The Aleph and Other Short Stories*. London. Penguin Books Ltd.

²⁰ Thurlow C. 2005. *Making Short Films*. Oxford. New York. Berg Publications.p55.

Negotiating Hollow space...

To conclude this story of art production, I return once more to the studio/gallery, and the iridescent image-object that shimmers in the dark mid-space of the room. The viewer to the installation must move metaphorically around the exploded elevations of the house and site in order to fully view the work. 'Other' space is invigorated through their ambulation. Bodily movement edits both space and image, through which delimitation is not just witnessed but felt.

Only by dwelling in the house – imaginatively - can the viewer discern and experience a shift in temporal reality. They become witness, experiencing replicated and shared geographies between performers, site and the new habitation of the installation.

Francis Ford Coppola said that a film is made three times over. The first is "the construction" (writing), the second "the filming", and third "the edit". In this exploratory text it is crucial to understand that the process of this moving-image was less delineated than the model set out by Coppola. However, if we borrow his descriptive model, we can say that the moving-image installation is made five times over: the first being the construction that seeps into the second stage of the filming process, the third the edit, the fourth the installation of the artwork, and the fifth time is in the mind and imagination of the viewer.²¹

The notion of 'openness' pertaining to this specific geographic site and my interpretation of it, stemmed from the implosive nature of the site witnessed in conjunction with reading Borges' description of beholding *The Aleph*, which he describes as measuring little more than an inch, and holding everything, all space, all time, the unimaginable universe, contained, but not limited in an iridescent sphere. Drawing comparisons with the sight that beheld Borges' eyes - the iridescent cube of the moving-image installation that hovers in the dark mid-space of the studio - similarly holds space and time. It contains but cannot limit, it shifts, mutates and changes for each and every viewer in each and every new space and showing, but it also remains the same.

In this way, and for a time, the studio became the cellar in which the moving-image

²¹ Thurlow C. 2005. *Making Short Films*. Oxford. New York. Berg Publications. p55.

'Hollow' was held. The multiple spaces of site, house, edit and installation are experienced by the viewer, and it is within this interval that a new state of occupation occurs and the installation becomes fleetingly complete. So, perhaps and after all, one might argue for a space that, although highly complex and fluid, is recognised as an imaginative space, where openness can be thought of as a virtue with its own inherent, alternative, shifting parameters.