

UTS Gallery

SIDNEY MCMAHON
MAGGOT

UTS Artist in Residence 2021 - 2022

UTS ACKNOWLEDGES THE GADIGAL PEOPLE OF THE EORA NATION, THE BOOROBERONGAL PEOPLE OF THE DHARUG NATION, THE BIDIAGAL PEOPLE AND THE GAMAYGAL PEOPLE UPON WHOSE ANCESTRAL LANDS OUR UNIVERSITY STANDS. WE PAY OUR RESPECTS TO THE ELDERS BOTH PAST AND PRESENT, ACKNOWLEDGING THEM AS THE TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF KNOWLEDGE FOR THESE LANDS.



INTRODUCTION

Since 1988, UTS has supported contemporary artistic practices through the activities of the UTS Gallery & Art Collection. The UTS Artist in Residence program was initiated in 2021 to extend the university's commitment to Australian artists and support the development and presentation of experimental new work.

The residency program seeks to acknowledge the community of practices, knowledges and pedagogies that shape UTS, and provide a supportive framework for knowledge sharing and cross-disciplinary collaboration of mutual benefit to NSW-based artists and university research.

Sidney McMahon is one of two artists supported by the inaugural UTS Artist in Residence Program to develop and present a new work in collaboration with UTS research over 12 months (2021 - 2022). The inaugural program has tested the boundaries of cross disciplinary enquiry and collaboration. With each discipline bringing their own distinct language, technologies, and sets of practices to the process, a great deal of patience and faith is needed to find common ground.

Sidney was guided by Dr YK Wang and his students at the UTS Tech Lab to explore the potential future applications of Brain Computer Interaction (BCI) technology to extend human experience. Used most widely in medicine—such as communication and movement devices for paralysed patients—BCI technology links brain activity with digital technology to allow for experiences of communication and interaction without the use of physical touch. Sidney was interested in exploring methods of audience interactivity and control, and in examining the ways in which our lives might be further enmeshed with technology through neuroprosthetics. Sidney embraced the potential of this new technology to produce *Maggot*, an original and affective new work that examines the production and reclamation of desire.

The UTS Artist in Residence program demonstrates the value of embedding contemporary art within a research institution: to enable artists to make work they wouldn't otherwise be able to make, and to showcase the innovation of the university in new ways.

I would like to thank the Faculty of Engineering and IT for partnering with Sidney on this program of enquiry and experimentation, and express my gratitude to the Anita and Luca Belgiorno-Nettis Foundation and the Faculty of Engineering and IT, whose generous funding made the 2021 Artist in Residence program possible. My gratitude and thanks most of all to Sidney McMahon, YK Wang and their teams for their time, courage and risk-taking during this generative and experimental residency program.

Stella Rosa McDonald
Curator, UTS Gallery & Art Collection

MAGGOT

Sidney McMahon

I've always been interested in technology. Something about the logic of the interface makes me feel captivated and safe. I often feel this logic can hold things that I can't.

Maggot uses the 2000 ILOVEYOU computer virus as a framework for understanding and decoding love and intimacy. The virus was created by Onel de Guzman, a college student in Manila, Philippines. At the time, it was one of the world's most destructive computer-related disasters, affecting over 50 million computers and causing most large corporations to completely shut down their mail systems.

I'm using the virus in this work as a way of processing, via the CPU, recurring ideas of love and intimacy within our lives. In this work you are the maggot, the virus, and the voyeur.

Maggot was created during a time in my life when I couldn't feel a sense of intimacy with the world. I was looking out of the window and all I could see were flashes of other peoples' existences. I kept thinking back to when I felt love, how it developed, how it spread, what it was. I was revisiting scenes and ideas and feelings of intimacy to try and hold onto reality.

Connection, control, intimacy, love, and viruses all felt sort of repulsive. The sort of repulsion you might feel when you see a heaving mass of maggots and realise that one day you'll be under their mouths; just one part of a cycle without end.

I'm searching for something.

It's asking me to produce the colours,
the texture of salt

Sidney McMahon, *Maggot*, 2022, Video still

I love you.
A viral confession.

Sidney McMahon, *Maggot*, 2022, Video still

Red towels grasping at arses in the corner,
their eyes thick.

Sidney McMahon, *Maggot*, 2022, Video still

Maggot, are you trembling?

Sidney McMahon, *Maggot*, 2022, Video still

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UTS Gallery

UTS Artists in Residence 2021 - 2022

Sidney McMahon, Written script in excel for Maggot, 2022

ON CONSUMPTION, SIGNALS AND MAGGOTS IN THE WORK OF SIDNEY MCMAHON

Amelia Wallin

The particular biology of maggots allows them to breathe and eat simultaneously, without pause, 24 hours a day. It is this consumption that allows maggots to produce enough energy for their next cycle, the pupal stage, before becoming flies. Because their eggs are invisible to the human eye, in ancient Greece and medieval Europe it was believed that maggots appeared in meat and other organic matter through spontaneous generation. The maggot's insatiable appetite for rotting flesh has led to their prevailing association in Western thought with decay and the cyclical processes of birth, life, and death. Yet despite being innocuous, maggots conjure revolution. Generally encountered in a teeming mass, they are known to produce metabolic heat as a result of their sheer density and ceaseless activity. But here, in the work of Sidney McMahon, there is maggot – singular – and that maggot is you.

Maggot slips the headband or cap over their head. The strap is adjusted, until a sensor is fitted snugly at the back. Once correctly fitted and calibrated, this sensor detects electrical activity in the neural pathways of the brain. 'NextMind' is the name given to this new device which uses sensors and associated EEG technology to track the focus of the eyes. Eliminating any need for clicking, scrolling, pressing, or touching, 'NextMind' enables machines to be controlled purely by receiving data from what your eyes are seeing.

As Donna Haraway foretold in her now seminal text, "A Cyborg Manifesto", "Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals".¹ Haraway continues, "People are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque".² The 'NextMind' hardware is designed to be discrete and requires an intimate coupling between person and machine. The headset must be fitted in a precise location on the back of the head. In order to achieve optimal calibration, the user, characterised here as Maggot, must focus their attention, sight and breath. When machine and mind are in synthesis, the cycle begins.

Bridging the gap between our bodies and our devices, this technology holds potential for seamless integration with our smart homes and devices. Accordingly, 'NextMind' is marketed as possessing a dizzying potential for efficiency without lifting a finger. However, like many technological

```

using System.Collections.Generic;

public class VideoTree {
    public string VideoPath = "assets/streamingassets/videos/root.mp4";

    // keeps a list of the numbers selected
    public readonly List<int> VideoSelections = new List<int>();

    // adds integer selected to the list and triggers an update of video path
    public void selectOption(int option) {
        VideoSelections.Add(option);
        updateVideoPath();
    }

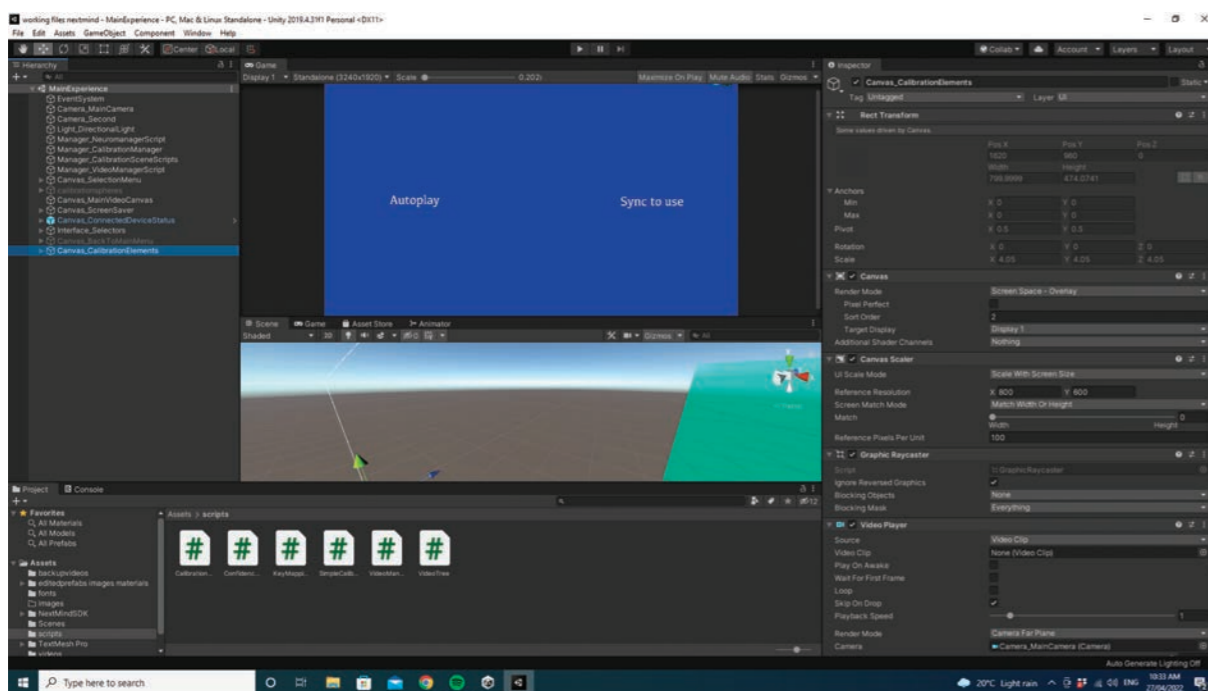
    private void updateVideoPath() {
        if (VideoSelections.Count == 0) {
            VideoPath = "assets/videos/root.mp4";
        }

        VideoPath = "assets/videos/";

        // DDS to the existing videopath with the most recent selection - eg STAGE 1 option1, STAGE2 option1 = videos/option_1option1.mp4
        foreach (var selection in VideoSelections) {
            VideoPath += "option_" + selection;
        }

        VideoPath += ".mp4";
    }
}
    
```

Sidney McMahon, *Unity Script
Video Tree for Maggot*, 2022



Sidney McMahon, *Unity
Programming for Maggot*, 2022

advancements that promise an increase in productivity, it also forewarns of a new chapter in the future of Technocapitalism, and the monitoring of data received through the eye represents new levels of surveillance for the labour force. No longer on the market, ‘NextMind’ has been acquired by the camera and social media company Snap, who intend to develop the technology into augmented reality glasses.

Like the maggots that consume without stopping, capitalism has long dreamed of a labour force capable of continuous work and consumption. After all, the ultimate worker and/or consumer is one who doesn’t sleep. In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary writes of a new conception of time, where working without pause, without limits, is “plausible, even normal”.³ What Crary terms a mode of “permanent expenditure” is undermined by the persistent biological needs of being human; our bodies get in the way. Eating, drinking, sleeping, and shitting cannot be eliminated or sped up and therefore are the enemy of productivity. “Bioderegulation”, coined by theorist Teresa Brennan, describes the fracture between the ceaseless drive of the market and the physical limitations of the human body.⁴ Simply put, it is the deregulation of our biology, such as our disrupted sleep, our changed eating habits. But as Brennan writes in her book *Globalisation and Its Terrors*, deregulation does not mean the absence of all forms of regulation; it means “passing regulation to the machine”.⁵ As our machines increase in efficiency, our bodies race and strain to keep up the same levels of productivity and proficiency. Like the dishwasher marketed to housewives in the 1950s as a time savings device, efficient technology makes time for new kinds of labour.

Queer internal spaces have long featured in McMahon’s work. Through installation, sculpture and performance, McMahon builds visceral worlds that are at once safe and alarming, intimate yet revealing. Previously, McMahon’s works have been materiality dense, featuring rope, fabric, and chains, alongside video installation. For this new commission, McMahon’s materials are arrestingly minimal. The installation at UTS Gallery includes three screens in portrait orientation, emanating blue light into the space. The text on the screens is narrated by a computer-generated voice and accompanied by a soundtrack, produced by Annie McKinnon and described by McMahon as “porn hub meets Mario world”.

Maggot extends McMahon’s practice of queer world-building. The narrative prose that audibly fills the space and features on the screens evokes associations with the club, that anti-capitalist space of resistance. For McMahon, the club is a site where the blue screen fades away. We are freed

from our devices; you may be awake all night but you’re off the clock. It is a space that exists outside the logic of capitalist production, where the body and its desires reign supreme.

Following a choose-your-own-adventure style narrative, *Maggot* evokes a sense of endless consumption. Like a continuous scroll, the narrative options feel literally endless. Fitted with the ‘NextMind’ headset, you cross a threshold into a liminal zone. The viewer uses their eyes to answer questions that drive the narrative forwards. The body may be left behind, but its appetites remain. There are cowboys and cherubs, physical touch, open mouths and brushing hands. Desire features strongly, but look, don’t touch, these adventures and appetites are only for your eyes.

The work’s intimacy is modelled on a Y2K era computer virus that targeted users through an email attachment titled ILOVEYOU. Driven by curiosity and desire, those who opened the attachment would find their computer infected. This specific kind of virus, known as a computer worm, replicates itself to spread to other computers. Like the supposed spontaneous generation of maggots, it was pervasive and invisible until it had infected everything. So effective was this play on intimacy that the ILOVEYOU virus remains one of the farthest-reaching computer viruses ever. For McMahon, this viral love letter, which lies dormant until it is opened, speaks to a detached form of intimacy and in *Maggot*, the same mode of voyeuristic desire is at play.

Using the ‘NextMind’ technology to link our visual and cognitive behaviours, *Maggot* examines the politics and power of looking: who looks and who is seen. Through cycles of narrative and deft technological integration, *Maggot* probes the limits of our bodies and desires in relation to the demands of market capitalism. Like the insatiable appetites of the maggot, the work instigates a state of frenzied consumption, leading the viewer through scenario after scenario. Yet after so much consumption, a strange aftertaste remains. McMahon positions the viewer in a web of questions; what are we, as distinct from corporations? Where are the limits of the body? What are the edges of myself?

ENDNOTES

1. Donna Haraway, Cary Wolfe (ed.), *Manifestly Haraway: The Cyborg Manifesto and the Companion Species Manifesto*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 201
2. Ibid.,
3. Jonathon Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013), p. 10
4. Teresa Brennan, *Globalisation and Its Terrors: Daily Life in the West* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 20
5. Ibid.,

CONTRIBUTORS

Sidney McMahan is an interdisciplinary artist working across sculptural installation, video and performance, with an interest in architecture, the body, memory and feeling. McMahan's work brings together distinct cultural contexts, as well as social and economic systems to explore a personal queer narrative. They completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Southern Queensland in 2009, a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Hons) at Sydney College of the Arts (USYD) in 2010, a Master of Art Curatorship at USYD in 2011 and a Master of Fine Arts at Sydney College of the Arts at USYD in 2015.

McMahan was an artist in residence at Parramatta Artists' Studios from 2016 - 2018, and was awarded the 2017 Parramatta City Council Visual Arts Fellowship. In 2017 they completed a residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, and Studio Voltaire, London. In 2018 they completed residencies at Wysing Arts Centre, UK, and a travelling residency between Kyoto and Tokyo organised by Move Arts Japan in collaboration with Asialink Arts. They have shown nationally and internationally in solo, group and curatorial projects in various galleries including, The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (VIC), ACE Open (SA), Clearview Ltd (LDN), Open Source Gallery (NY), Auto Italia (LDN), Metro Arts (QLD), and Verge Gallery (NSW).

Amelia Wallin is a curator and writer, with a focus on care, feminisms, and alternate curatorial frameworks and models for instituting. Amelia is Curator at La Trobe Art Institute and was previously the Director of West Space from 2019-2022. She has held curatorial and administrative positions at Performa (New York), Campbelltown Arts Centre, Biennale of Sydney, Performance Space, Performing Lines and Vivid Ideas (Sydney). She has played an active role in Australian arts development through directorial positions at Firstdraft, Tiny Stadiums Festival, and as co-founder of the residency and exhibition program Sydney Guild.

Her curatorial projects have been exhibited at West Space, The Kitchen, The Hessel Museum of Art, Performa15, and Firstdraft, and she has contributed writing to Various/Artists, Running Dog, Runway, un Magazine, Artlink, and others. She is a member of the Performance Review editorial Board, Associate Researcher for Precarious Movements, and a current peer assessor for the Australia Council for the Arts. Amelia holds a Bachelor of Art Theory and a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from the University of New South Wales, and a Master of Curatorial Studies from Bard College, New York. She is a PhD candidate at Monash University, school of Art, Architecture and Design.

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I dedicate this work to the writing and rewriting of love throughout my life.

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Maggot

Sidney McMahan
2022

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