

Huw Davies Gallery
15th July - 14th August, 2021

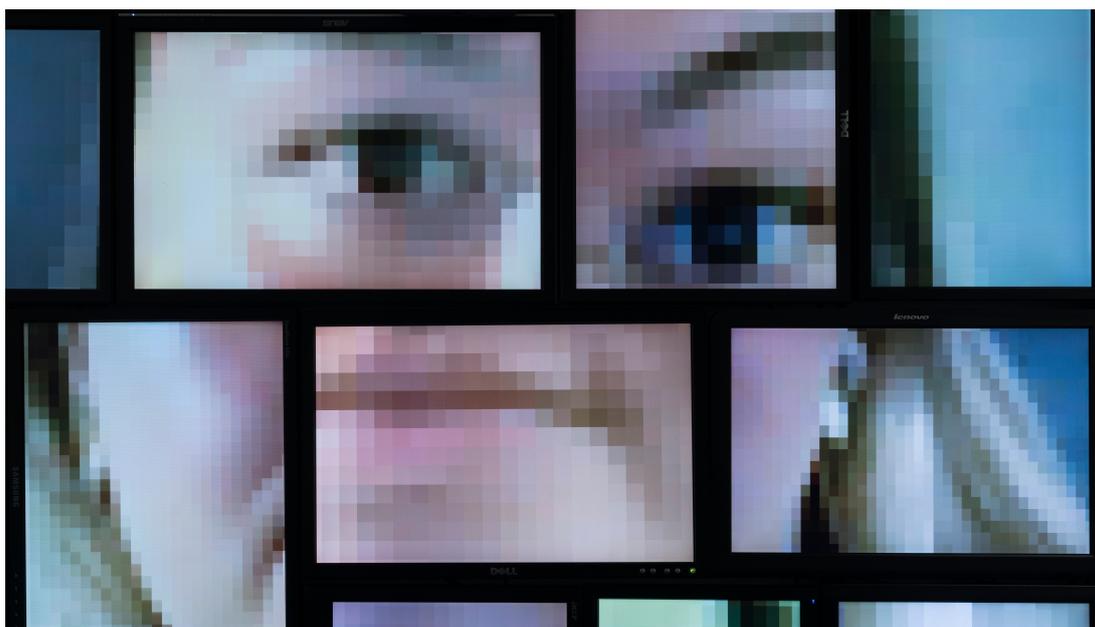
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Split

Chris Bowes

Through a multi-component, interactive 'mirror', Bowes surfaces our 21st century to-and-fro with screens and the processes of data capture, processing and deployment that shape us today.

As the viewer is reflected back on themselves, disjointed and disfigured, Bowes contests our often passive relationship with screen technologies and our embrace of their convenience in exchange for our privacy. While tech giants gather information on our day-to-day lives, using it to shape 'helpful' advertising, and security systems apply advanced algorithms to control public spaces, *Split* suggests that we are becoming caricatures of ourselves, equal parts captivating and disturbing.



Chris Bowes, *Monitor* (detail), 2020, webcams, screens, computers, code and cables

Looking Away

What strikes me initially is the responsiveness of Chris Bowes' video installation *Split*. From out of a chaotic onslaught of visual noise an image suddenly appears, comparatively quiet and gentle. Though somewhat monstrous, somewhat incomplete, in its stretching and spanning across an array of screens, there is a surprising coherence to the image. More than a collection of fragments, the synchronous movement opens up a space to look upon or look into. The faceted nature of the piece is oddly seductive, in that the image seems to flow over or through each screen, taking on different characteristics, but retaining a sense of uniformity. When the image breaks down – when the viewer looks away or when areas of the face become obscured – it does so completely, returning to the aforementioned noise.

In this responsiveness, the work acts as a selective mirror. It waits for a face. It is 'active' only so long as it registers a face, and the visitor must look upon themselves for it to remain in this active state. Like a conventional mirror, our image only exists within it so long as we stand in front of it.

The mirror develops a primary narcissism, opening onto what psychoanalysis calls the ideal ego. It allows for the idea of a coherent, authoritative, sense of self, and with this an agency, over our own body and its surrounds. Simultaneously, the mirror phase is the condition of our entry into the social world; our being in relation to others, and a codification of the body and its appropriate disposition and limits. Despite appearances, there is nothing natural or spontaneous about the mirror, the mirror is the symbol of our subjectivation, and of the hole or insufficiency that remains at its centre. The mirror reflects our self but this self is the self for the other, an objectifiable, delimited subject.

And still, from what can seem like a chaotic, uncontrollable flow of sensations, thoughts, worries, desires, the mirror snaps something into focus, the image of a self, staring directly back with our own eyes, an experience of (almost) absolute identification.

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But at the same time *Split* suggests something else. In the experience of the installation as a response to our presence it suggests not simply an encounter with one's own image, but something unseen, acting upon us, producing something, showing us something that we perhaps want to see, an experience that is disconcerting, disorienting. The phasing in and out seems to reinforce a loss of mastery, our image and our access to it are determined elsewhere.

It's the gap between these two effects of the mirror that *Split* comes to play upon, the narcissistic enjoyment of the self-image, and the disconcerting feeling of apperception. Though we know the image we are presented with is 'us', it is clearly also something else, the production of a representation that is beyond us.

I'm reminded of Samuel Beckett's *Film*, in which the camera literally pursues the fleeing protagonist. In the final moments of the piece the protagonist is confronted with the (terrible) recognition that the camera's gaze is simultaneously his 'own', that he perceives himself as an other, through the mediation of the apparatus.

This kind of confrontation is made explicit in *Split*. As the artist remarks, the piece literally 'looks back'. But the question remains: who, or what, looks back? Something looks back, something more than a compromised ego-ideal, something which takes on its own kind of presence, is suggestive of a simulation. The way in which the image cuts in and out so drastically seems to imply that this interloper exists in a separate dimension, not so much dependent on our presence, but instead preempting our arrival.

This looking back becomes uncanny. Freud, in a footnote to his classic essay on the subject, describes an experience of misrecognition in relation to his own reflection. The image, mistaken for a real person who resembles him, invokes in the author a sense of revulsion. Freud immediately jumps up to usher the intruder out of his train compartment – to banish this unwanted double from his domain.

The immediate encounter of *Split* may suggest this menacing doubling, but as we start to explore the space that this image opens up, a more playful, energising relationship can start to take hold.

Bruce Nauman's *Four Corner Piece* does something similar to *Film*. Walking around a square structure, the visitor turns each corner to see another screen at the end of the hall, and in this moment they catch a glimpse of themselves from behind, disappearing out of view. One can imagine coming to this work without any prior knowledge, and literally pursuing the apparition around the circuit without realising it is one's own image.

Nauman's installation instigates a kind of choreography, which develops from his own performance pieces for camera. *Split* likewise allows for a kind of performance to emerge between the viewer and imaging apparatus.

While Nauman prompts us to follow an image that is constantly escaping, *Split* demands our constant face to face attention to sustain the image. In this way it invokes the attention economy, and mirror effects, of social media.

Geert Lovink describes a form of sadness, particular to the online world, which manifests in the gap between one's inflated persona, and the real precariousness of one's sense of self-worth. The 'sad platforms', that have become a central domain of social life, are attuned to this sense of lack or insufficiency, in relation to which they manipulate our participation or attention. As Lovink relates, it's not uncommon for users to report their dissatisfaction or even disgust with their own actions online, or with the persona which they have actively or passively cultivated – yet it remains difficult to look away.

Split speaks of this heightened sense of self, and its exhausting maintenance, and more widely the effect that these media technologies have on the psyche and the temporal experience of the everyday. Even if we are not compelled individually to perform, or appear, a constant attention is demanded in relation to the stream of posts, images, and events that constitute our various feeds.

But at the same time *Split* seems to directly confound the normative conditions of appearance, gesture, or pose, that accompany the production of oneself as an image. This normative construction is especially apparent in the media personality, where what counts most of all is a particular idea of consistency and commitment. In the realm of social media this goes beyond a public obligation, to an attempt to fulfill a greater fantasy, that of living 'authentically', of becoming an ego-ideal.

By contrast, in the performance that we enter into with *Split* we maintain a somewhat amorphous, shifting sense of selfhood, that refuses consistency, or capture. Strangely enough, the disjointedness of this mirror allows for the beginnings of a dislodgment of the codifications through which we usually encounter our image.

Stephen Palmer

Stephen Palmer is an artist and writer living on unceded Wurundjeri Country. He was a facilitator of Light Projects ARI, a member of Artists' Committee, and is a founding member of the Artists' Union Working Group.

Chris Bowes | About

Chris Bowes is a photographer, educator and artist specialising in abstract and experimental photography and video. His current practice focuses on society's relationship with digital devices, often creating interactive installations that fracture the physical and digital worlds. Chris's work has been exhibited extensively around Australia, most recently in his solo exhibition '*The Cowboy*' at PhotoAccess, and is held in several significant collections including LACMA and The Macquarie Group.

List of Works

1	Chris Bowes, <i>Split</i> , 2021, webcam, screens, computer, code and cable, 145 x 250cm	1/1	\$3000
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More Online

Visit www.gallery.photoaccess.org.au to learn more about *Split*.