

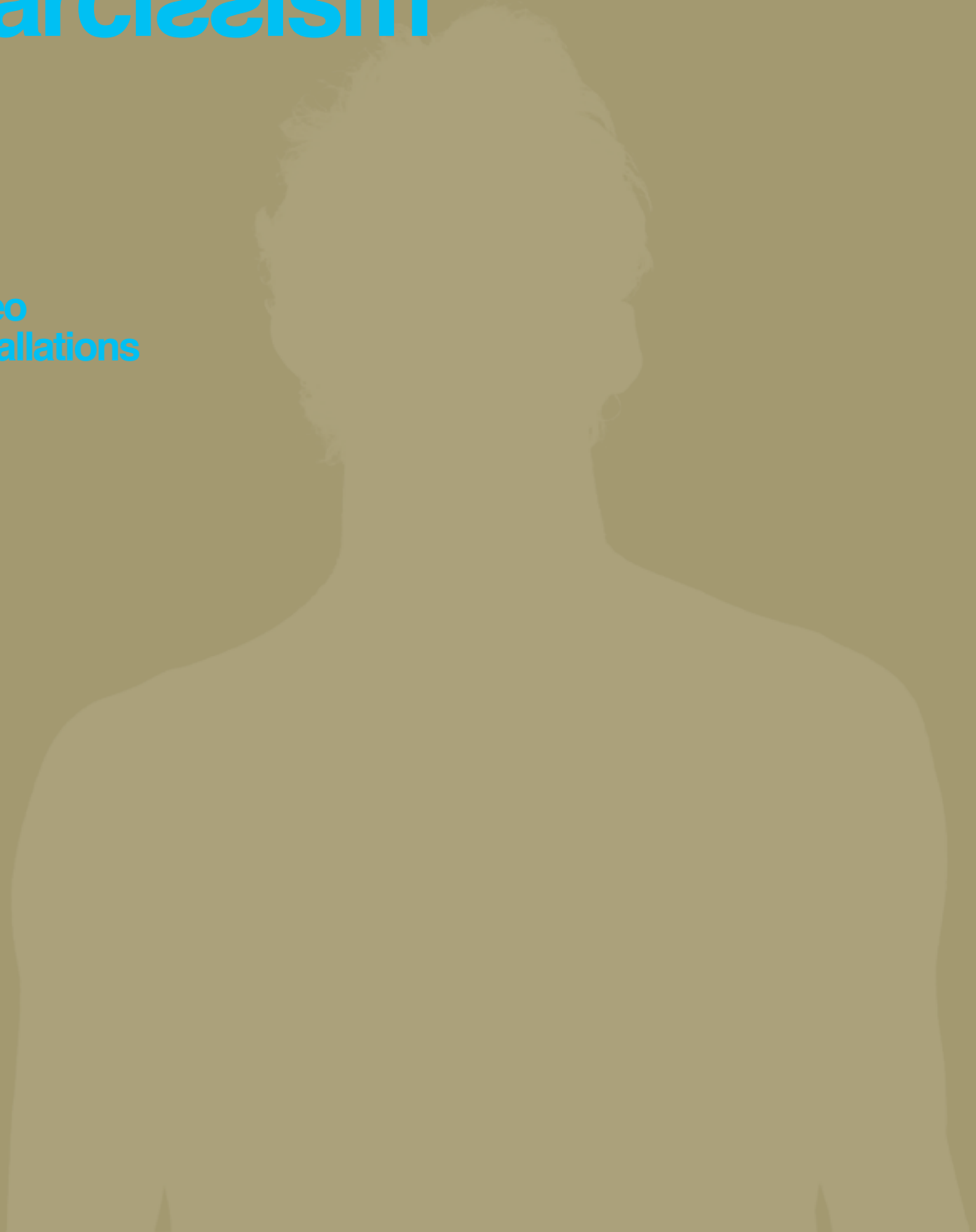
geoffrey  
alan  
rhodes

# double narcissism

big orbit gallery  
buffalo, ny

video  
installations

may 3 /  
june 28  
2008



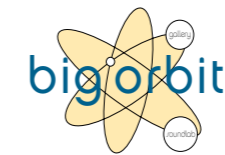
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through the  
looking glass:

## Geoffrey Alan Rhodes’ Double Narcissism

I was introduced to the work of  
Geoffrey Alan Rhodes during a screening  
of his 2005 film Tesseract at the  
Albright-Knox Art Gallery in 2006.

The film, which utilizes fragmented screens and a  
layering of moving images, focuses on the pioneer  
English photographer  
Eadweard Muybridge’s obsession with capturing  
movement and its bearing on the 1874 murder of  
his wife’s lover, Major Harry Larkyns,  
for which he was acquitted.

I was immediately struck by the film’s captivating imagery  
and Rhodes’ impressive ability to weave  
existing historical imagery into a compellingly  
haunting visual narrative.

Likewise, I was drawn to his Mirror Series. Having seen an excerpt of the work before jurying the Big Orbit Gallery members’ exhibition, for which Rhodes was selected from numerous entrants to receive a solo exhibition, the work stayed with me. I find myself revisiting its uncanny imagery every time I step in front of my own bathroom mirror, especially on those nights when sleep evades me and I walk aimlessly through my apartment in hopes of encountering the sandman waiting to induce slumber. Instead, I find myself encountering my own image in the bathroom mirror, and I stare blankly at my reflection, scrutinizing the topography of my face to the point of unfamiliarity.

“Double Narcissism”, 2006–08, permeates the viewer with a visual language that is numinous, yet derivative of everyday life. According to Greek mythology, a beautiful young man named Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in the waters of a spring and pined away (or killed himself) because he was unable to obtain the object of his affection. The flower that bears his name sprang up where he died. Although fictional, there is an element of absurdity in Narcissus’ plight that rings true—the idea that someone could fall in love with his or her own reflection seems impossible, yet we all know a narcissist; we may even be narcissists ourselves. The mirror itself also presents recollections of other fantastical tales in which narcissism turns ill-fated. In the popular fairy tale Snow White, the evil queen possesses a magical mirror to which she poses the question, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who in the land is fairest of all?” The mirror repeatedly replies, “You, my queen, are fairest of all.” However, one day the mirror instead replies, “Snow White is the fairest of them all,” and the queen, in a jealous rage, orders to have Snow White killed. Rhodes, wryly building upon these established references, has constructed a series of works that are as witty as they are complicated. Elements of fantasy, masochism, identity, and corporality feed into a narrative that reverberates within a society continually obsessed with plasticity and youth.



The “trompe-l’œil-like” effects that necessitate his process, which he sometimes partially reveals within the work, elevate his unique brand of experimental film to a performance that is initially for himself, and secondly, for the viewer.

At times humorous, and sometimes disturbing, Rhodes’ series, which likens a bathroom mirror “as the site for private rehearsal of the public persona,” oscillates from one character role to another, such as in *Helmet Head*, 2002, in which we encounter a man rehearsing pick-up lines. Here the disconcerting imagery of a “human belly button helmet” is only upstaged by the audio of classic one-liners such as “I don’t think you saw me, but I saw you,” and ‘I’m a Sagittarius.’ Evoking Vito Acconci’s confrontational early performance and video work, Rhodes takes on a self-possessive role, positioning his own body to serve simultaneously as the subject and object. While Rhodes’ work incorporates a myriad of influences, at the heart of this series is an arduous practice, which begs the viewer to engage further than in just one viewing. The “trompe-l’œil-like” effects that necessitate his process, which he sometimes partially reveals within the work, elevate his unique brand of experimental film to a performance that is initially for himself, and secondly, for the viewer. This premise is played out in the series’ title and its content.

Whereas each individual work no doubt stands alone, it is with Rhodes’ installation design at Big Orbit Gallery that the series comes to full fruition. Conceptual artist turned critic and theorist, Dan Graham has written extensively on how video functions communicatively as a mirror because of its ability to deliver information in real time. Rhodes’ work, while not viewed in real time, instead plays on this notion by creating real spaces in which the viewer may get lost in the theatrics and find him or herself searching for the presence of a live performance that the work calls to mind. Here, all five of the Mirror Series videos are central to the space, synced and projected onto separate 8 x 8 foot Plexiglas screens. These works, however, form only one aspect of a triad of installations. Flanking either side are two additional works—*Double Narcissus*, a projection of a head underwater, doubled, that is both reflected and refracted by a half mirror on two screens—and *Mirror/Butterfly*, an installation of a real medicine cabinet mirror, which Rhodes cleverly uses as a projection screen.

Like Alice stepping through the looking glass, upon entry from the sunlit outdoors to the darkness of the Gallery interior, the viewer is instantly transported to the vantage point of a voyeur who stumbles upon a bathroom performance, for one.

Holly E. Hughes  
Associate Curator, Albright-Knox Art Gallery

geoffrey  
alan  
rhodes

# double narcissism





Mirror Room  
8'X8' plexiglass walls  
with 4'X3' rear-projection screens



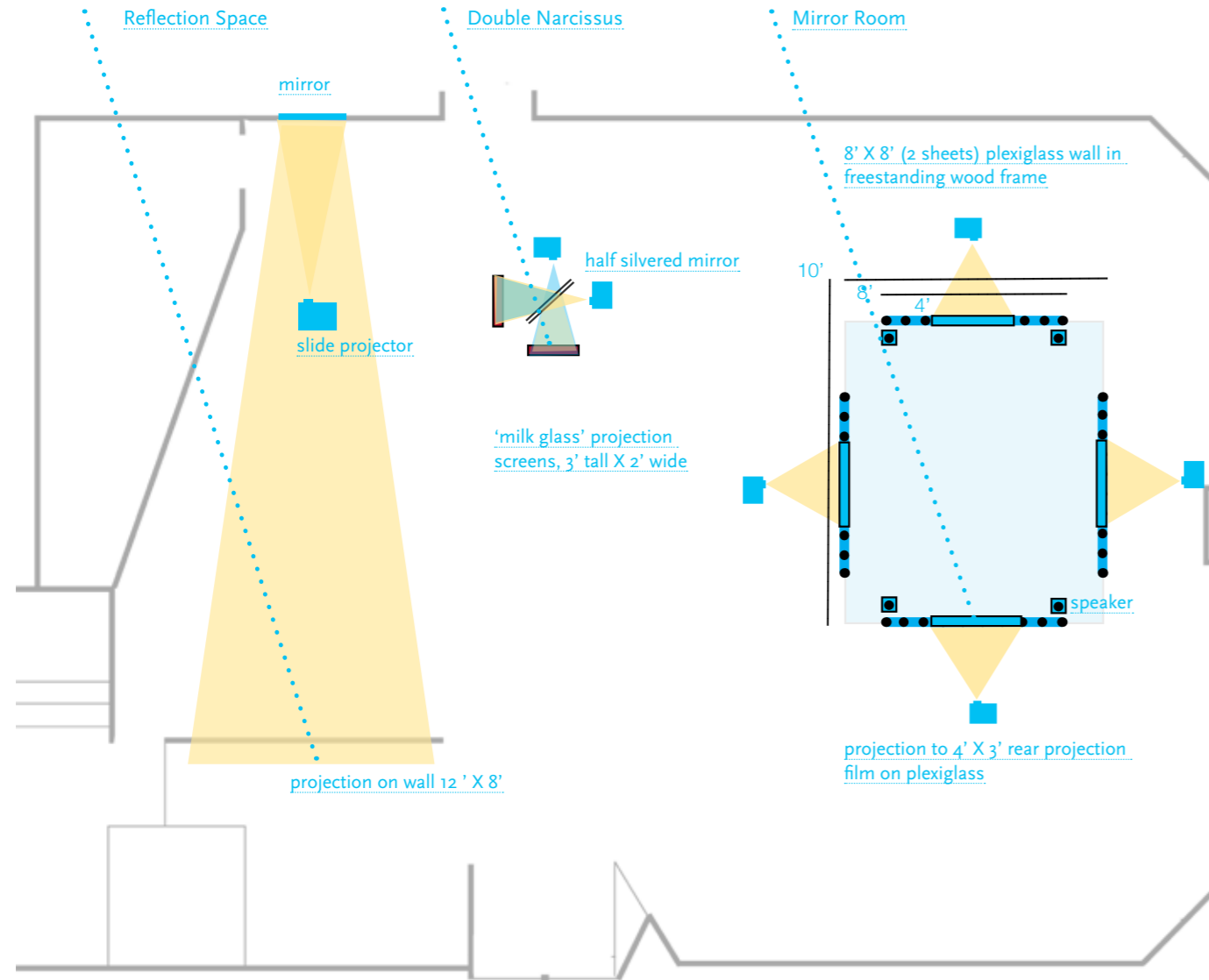
View out from the center of the Mirror Room towards the supporting installations



Site-specific installation, a slide is projected onto a wall-mounted mirror and is reflected onto the opposing wall, 12' X 8'

installation schematic for

Big Orbit, summer 08



1. Mirror Room

8'X4' sheets of plexi, 4'X3' rear-projection adhesives, 8' X 8' wood wall frames, video projectors, DVD players, self-powered speakers, mixer, projector stands, speaker stands

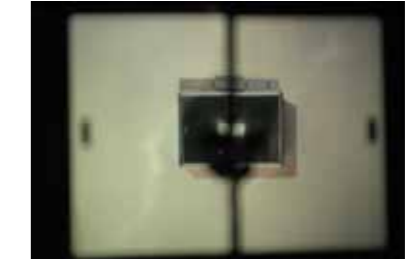
To the right as you enter the gallery is a plexiglass room with 8'X8' free-standing clear walls creating a reflective space to be entered through the room's corners. At the center of each wall is a 4'X3' translucent screen mounted at about the height and scale of a large bathroom mirror; the viewer can see both themselves and the opposing wall in the shiny surface of the plexi-glass. All of the four screens play a different looping video of a medicine cabinet mirror reflecting an empty bathroom; they are mounted exactly opposite each other as if reflecting. Performances take place in the videos in synced pairs (the total program lasting about 14 minutes): from the perspective of the entry way, the far right wall plays 'Mirror 1 / Butterfly' (see DVD) and the two speakers in the corners of that wall play a binaural stereo sound mix for the video. This is followed by the two middle screens playing 'Mirror 2 / HelmetHead I' and 'Mirror 3 / HelmetHead II' at the same time, the four speakers in the corners of the room play audio for the videos simultaneously. This is followed by the two opposite walls playing in synchronicity, Mirror 4 & 5. Here the lights depicted in the near screen suddenly turn on. The sequence then loops.



2. Double Narcissus

2'X3' 'milk glass' plexi, video projectors, 1.5'X1.5' half-silvered mirror, projector stands, screen stands

In the center of the gallery is a tight configuration of 2 screens, 2 projectors, and a half-silvered mirror. The projectors, cocked at 90 degrees, project opposing looping videos of the artist's head submerged underwater from the front and the back. On striking the half-silvered mirror at the center, the beam splits and both projectors shine on both translucent plexi-glass screens, 2' X 3', overlaying the front perspective with the back.



3. Reflection Space

medicine cabinet mirror, slide projector, slide projector stand

At the left of the gallery is a site-specific installation of reflective space. A slide projector shines onto a medicine cabinet mirror mounted on the wall; the projection reflects to appear huge on the opposing wall. Both the image of the slide (an augmented photo of the medicine cabinet) and the reflected marks of the cabinet mirrors appear on the wall enlarged to 12' X 8'.

## self interview



### [Where did these videos come from?](#)

The Mirror Series came from a confrontation of two desires in my work. I was always fascinated by the early video art of Will Wegman, Peter Campus, and Vito Acconci, and I was exploring ways of making videos that had a similar engagement with the materials of contemporary consumer video: the way ideas of digital effects have become part of the video device itself, and anyone might make a video imagining the simple layering and effects that they will put on it with their computer. An understanding of 'blue screen', and 'CG' has become part of the visual language for many people. This came into contact with a period in my life when I was living in Toronto and in the midst of a difficult post production of a feature film documentary on the plastic surgery culture in LA. I was making the film with an Austrian Theorician, and we would spend late nights discussing what the body meant, how we develop an idea of who we are, and I was introduced to theories of identity creation based on reflection and images. This combined with an isolated time in Toronto, when I was spending too much time at the studio, laboring over a difficult edit, and wandering from room to room late at night, eventually winding up in the bathroom, looking at myself in the bathroom mirror, as if to check if I was still really there  
...making things can be a stew like that.

### [How do the videos work?](#)

Each of the videos in the Mirror Series tries to construct a unique stage for performance through formal concepts and effects. The auto-performances are captured in long take in this conceptual situation; I usually got it on the second take. What I wanted was to implicate the viewer— from working on the documentary I had become fascinated with the idea of a camera capturing a private space and I wanted to take this as far as possible, actually putting the viewer in this private space and also complicate by adding an element of fantasy... as if the viewer was being pulled in to an interior world.

Watching these videos, if you know a little bit about digital video and camera, you get pulled in by the formal elements: how did he shoot the mirror without the camera being seen? What is he really looking at when he performed this? Like watching the extras of a big budget film DVD, we understand that the performance of a video reality has to include the imagination of what will be done to that video. The series of situations— the use of special paint, and helmets, and props— I imagined as irrational symbols or allegories, like the vivid pictures we try to use to understand our dreams at night. I used in-ear microphones for the videos... from my background as a musician, I am very sensitive to the quality of the sound in video, and here I wanted a separate, more intimate reality for the sound... if our understanding of the represented world is reflected and confounded by all the reflections inside the video, the body and the performance is our anchor of meaning; the audio rides along with this body.

### [What about the installation?](#)

The installation of the Mirror Series videos in Double Narcissism at Big Orbit Gallery sought to architecturally install the situation of the videos, creating a space in which the viewer can enter the mirror. I searched out a material that would work as both a reflective surface and a viewing surface, to create a room in which the viewer could see themselves infinitely, and also be confronted by the Mirror Series videos as if in the room themselves. The installation became more fantasmic than the videos... in the dark gallery these images of altered bodies (like the mythical centaurs and griffins and chimaeras) hovering in the air, reflecting each other in the glass and illuminating your body, for me evoked a passage in to dreams and fantasy... somewhere between the imagined and the real that I think is appropriate for video art.

## the mirror series

[2006-2008, 5 X 4 minute loops, HD video](#)



[Mirror Series #2, 'HelmetHead I'](#)

The artist dons a helmet which, when unwrapped, reveals his face replaced with an undulating belly button. To himself in the mirror, he rehearses pickup lines, or fantasizes an encounter. We hear his voice from inside the helmet, implicating the viewer in an auto-erotic session.



[Mirror Series #3, 'HelmetHead II'](#)

The mirror situation is complicated: on the opposing wall is another, identical bathroom mirror reflecting an infinite loop. The artist enters this space and dons a welder's one-sided helmet that replaces the front of his head with the back. Opening the helmet's viewing box, the artist cuts hair from the back of his head and pastes it on the eye slits, resolving his back to his front.



[Mirror Series #4, 'Baby Face'](#)

The helmet is again used to replace the artist's face. Here the infant's first experience of reflection is enacted: gazing in recognition of its own self being seen. An auto-erotic affirmation is attempted.



[Mirror Series #5, 'No Face'](#)

The artist removes his face completely and delivers an 'effacing' monologue to the mirror of self-condemnation. As he spits at himself, the screen itself becomes wet as if the performance somehow breaks through the reflection game.



# geoffrey alan rhodes

Geoffrey Alan Rhodes cut his teeth in the experimental music scene of Seattle in the 90's, and made a second career in film and media art, transplanting to upstate New York, and graduating with an MFA in Media Arts from SUNY Buffalo in 2005. He is currently teaching film in Rochester, New York, and producing both gallery installation art and feature films.

## Solo Exhibitions:

2008: International Symposium on Electronic Art, Singapore  
2008: Double Narcissism, Big Orbit Gallery, Buffalo, New York  
2007: Blue Room, Open Video Project, Rome, Italy  
2006: Tesseract, Albright Knox Art Galley, Buffalo, New York  
2006: 'Body Bilder' show, Shikenader Theatre, Vienna, Austria,  
2006: Tesseract, Rochester Contemporary Art Gallery, New York  
2005: Tesseract, Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo, New York

## Group Exhibitions:

2008: Opening Ceremonies, Burchfield Penny Arts Center, Buffalo, NY  
2007: Moscow International Film Festival, Russia  
2007: Chelsea Art Museum, Perpetual Art Machine special selection  
2007: Particulate. Vox Populi Gallery, Philadelphia Pennsylvania  
2007: EMAF, European Media Arts Festival, Osnabrück, Germany  
2007: Ritual and Repetition, Richmond Center Art Galleries, MI  
2007-08: Perpetual Art Machine, touring video installation  
Scope Miami – Miami Florida  
2nd Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art  
Salone del Mobile - Milan Italy  
2007: Open Video Projects, Mudima Fondazione, Milan, Italy  
2006: Sound Needs Image, Reinberger Gallery, Cleveland  
2006: Particulate, LumpWest Gallery, Eugene Oregon  
2006: Interval (2), Slade Research Center, London  
2006: Resolutions, Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, Buffalo  
2006: OMSK Film!Video!Performance!Sound!Mayhem!, London  
2005: Termite TV, Museum of Modern Art, New York  
2005: Sound Needs Image, Carnegie Arts Center, Buffalo  
2005: Jutro Filmu, Warsaw, Poland  
2004: International Surrealist Film Festival, New York  
2004: Images Festival, Toronto, Ontario  
2004: 24/48, Burchfield Penny Arts Centre, Buffalo, New York  
2003: Kamikaze Collective, Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center.

