

# *Lightness of Being*

**Maria Osmotherly BFA (Hons)**

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Signed:

**Maria Osmotherly**

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# PREFACE

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Two significant events in recent years have exerted a major influence on this thesis, leading to a profound shift in my studio practice and its theoretical underpinnings. When my partner was diagnosed with cancer in the very early stages of my post-graduate studies, I was not to know then that this was only the beginning of a long journey which would fundamentally change my philosophical moorings. After surgery to remove a tumor encountered complications, he was transferred to the Intensive Care Unit where for three weeks he clung to life and endured countless further surgical procedures. On several occasions it seemed certain he would not pull through. Ultimately, he survived; however, the experience of sitting by his bedside through those terrible weeks had an enormous impact on me, both emotionally and intellectually. To witness someone close hover so precariously on the brink forced on me a new awareness of our existential fragility.

Not long after this I was confronted by another crisis, with similar effect. After a stay in hospital with breathing problems, a close friend was diagnosed with the asbestos-related cancer mesothelioma and subsequently given only six to eighteen months to live. To make matters even more tragic, this same woman had lost her

thirteen-year-old daughter a few years previously to a very rare auto-immune disease. This girl was also my own daughter's best friend.

These two deeply upsetting episodes have forced me to reflect on the tenuousness of existence, on the relationships we forge with others in order to belong, and the significance, or weight, of our being on this earth. The arbitrary, yet unavoidable nature of mortality seemed to have given these things a new gravity and, inevitably, could not help but merge into both my studio practice and theoretical investigations.



# ABSTRACT

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This thesis focuses on the metaphysical question of whether or not ‘being’ or ‘existence’ (our human life as we live it on this earth) can carry metaphorical weight, giving life serious meaning. In other words: how can we balance the weight (significance, importance) of our existence with the lightness (fragility, transience) that is present simultaneously? This question prompted an investigation into the existential, conceptual and literal notions of weight and lightness and the way these concepts impact on our life. It has also initiated an essentially philosophical approach to the research involving the exploration of theories of phenomenology and the sublime in the hope of finding a resolution to this question through their application within the field of contemporary sculpture.

The aim of my studio practice is to communicate the metaphysical notion of human significance or lack thereof through combining fragile allusions to the human form (in the shape of twigs) with large, heavy structures in the form of rocks and boulders. The sculptural works will essentially provide a physical expression of the notions of lightness and weight by which we might measure our existential significance. A strategy of repetition has been integrated to enhance

this expression, thus reflecting my understanding of Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence. Photography is used as a major supportive medium.

Finally, rather than asserting any comprehensive challenge to the areas of philosophy cited, this thesis should be considered an expression of specific philosophical exploration of our existential fragility within the context of sculptural concerns.

# INTRODUCTION

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**H**aving migrated from the Netherlands to Australia in 1994, I have recently come to realise how strong my assimilation to Australian culture has become over the years. The sheer volume of humanity and the lack of space in the overpopulated, tiny country I had left were highlighted on recent visits, leaving me feeling decidedly claustrophobic and unsettled. It is hard to come to terms with the fact that as a Dutch-born Australian there is very little desire in me to return permanently to the country of my birth, even though there is still a strong emotional connection to the place and the family that was left behind. Intermittent travel to the Netherlands has emphasised the amount of alienation that has occurred over the years; the matter of belonging in only one place has been brought into question. This has resulted in a great deal of reflection on the direction of my research. Instead of dealing directly with the issues of migration and bodily absence (as was explored in earlier research during my Honours candidature), there has been a shift towards considering the importance and relevance of existence on a personal level, not just in one place or another but more so in an existential sense. My earlier research involving questions of identity is still very relevant to the concept but there will be more emphasis on dealing

with phenomenological<sup>1</sup> matters in this paper which will offer a descriptive analysis of the mental and physical phenomena as we perceive them on a day to day basis. I have explored theories on the sublime to aid in the expression of feelings of insignificance and existential angst. These feelings emerged after dealing with the intensely personal life-and-death situations mentioned earlier and can also possibly be connected to the migration experience.

In this thesis I will be examining the question of whether our existence or “being” on this earth is important and relevant enough to carry metaphorical weight. I will use Milan Kundera’s book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as a point of departure, since the central theme that runs through the novel deals directly with this metaphysical problem. Here we are reminded that we only have one life to live, that life is fugitive and unbearably light.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition component aims at challenging the viewer with ontological questions and provokes existential thought through the use of both sculpture and photography. I consider the philosophical theories of phenomenology and the sublime and incorporate those in my work as follows. Our vastly divergent memories, thoughts and backgrounds cause us, the viewer, to interpret the things we see in many varied ways. This phenomenological manifestation is taken into consideration in my creative process. Some of my sculptural elements are real and some are constructed to be perceived as real – realising that not all viewers will be able or willing to accept this imposed reality. The sublime is reflected in the viewer’s confrontation with

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<sup>1</sup> Phenomenology: the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view.

David Woodruff Smith, *Phenomenology*

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology> [accessed on 14/04/09]

<sup>2</sup> Kundera, Milan, *the Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Faber and Faber, London, 1985

vastness in nature and fragile human existence. In the exhibition a large-scale sculpture and an enormous photograph aim to evoke existential fears and feelings of insignificance. My sculptural work consists of rocks (both real and faux) that are supported by fragile twigs and together they express the dichotomy of significance (weight) versus fragility (lightness) relating to our existence on earth. The largest rocks are constructed from lightweight materials (but appear to be very heavy) so they can be suspended. One is jutting out of the wall and is seemingly held up by a thin twig, challenging our view of reality while the other, larger one, is suspended precariously from the ceiling with a chair placed underneath it. The idea of sitting on this chair will evoke feelings of fragility through the fear of being crushed. A very large photograph of a rock face supported by a twig hints at feelings of the sublime by confronting us with the power of nature. Early in Kundera's novel Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence is introduced and this is reflected in my work through the use of repetitive elements (a digital presentation on a loop, a row of small rocks supported by orange twigs and a collection of small photographs).

Chapter one addresses my art practice, from earlier to more recent work. It shows the development of previous ideas and interests that have ultimately led me to my current research. It explains the progress of my studio practice (how I have moved away from a literal, figurative approach into a more conceptual one) and the way I express *Lightness of Being* in my sculptural and photographic work.

Chapter two describes Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence which is addressed in the opening chapter of Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.<sup>3</sup> Eternal recurrence is directly related to the importance of our actions and how they add meaning or significance to our life. This book has helped in directing me towards the course my research has taken because of its metaphysical and existential content and its evocative title. Both Bob Corbett's review of the novel<sup>4</sup> and Philip Kain's insight in Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence<sup>5</sup> have been useful writings in this context.

Chapter three defines what "being" and "existence" is, or what we understand it to be. It explores not only philosophical notions of being and existence, investigating the theories of Leszek Kolakowski, A.C. Grayling and analytic philosophers Bertrand Russell and W.V. Quine, but also looks at developments in the field of science. The way our known universe has expanded through the invention of the microscope and telescope has had substantial impact on our interpretations of human existence on this earth.

Chapter four clarifies the term phenomenology, touching on the theories of early twentieth-century philosophers Kierkegaard, Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger. It investigates the principle that our individual reality consists of objects as they are perceived in our personal consciousness, made up by our memories, thoughts, ideas and images. David Woodruff Smith elucidates the term

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<sup>3</sup> Milan Kundera, *the Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Faber and Faber, London, 1985, p3

<sup>4</sup> Bob Corbett, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being", *Perennial Classics*, New York, Oct 2001

<sup>5</sup> Philip J. Kain, "Nietzsche, Eternal Recurrence, and the Horror of Existence", *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, New York, Spring 2007

phenomenology clearly.<sup>6</sup> Other main writers on the subject include Don Welton on *The Essential Husserl*<sup>7</sup> and Hubert L. Dreyfus who comments on Heidegger's theory of *Being and Time*.<sup>8</sup>

The traditional sublime is addressed in chapter five, which compares the ideas of Longinus, Kant and Burke. Examples of the contemporary sublime in art are given, using works by Damien Hirst, Bill Viola and Anish Kapoor. Paul Crowther is the main contributor to texts on the contemporary sublime.<sup>9</sup>

In Chapter six the concept of weight and lightness is explored through the sculptural works of four contemporary artists who have influenced my own work through their art practice (Lee Ufan, Cornelia Parker, Antony Gormley and Anish Kapoor). I specifically address the challenge of instilling a sense of lightness into sculpture; a medium which traditionally deals with heavy elements like stone and bronze.

My migration to Australia in 1994 has been a catalyst for the research I have undertaken so far. From dealing with bodily absence during my Honours candidature, this research has developed more recently into questioning alienation and belonging. This, combined with the upsetting episodes I described in the

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<sup>6</sup> David Woodruff Smith, Amie L. Thomasson (eds.), *Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005

<sup>7</sup> Welton, Don (ed.), *The Essential Husserl*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1999

<sup>8</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-world: a Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991

<sup>9</sup> Crowther, Paul (ed.), *The Contemporary Sublime: sensibilities of transcendence and shock*, Academy editions, London, 1995

Preface, has led to a shift in my research towards examining human existence on a personal level and the premise of whether or not our existence on this earth can carry metaphorical weight. The content of the thesis has become more existential in nature and studies philosophies of phenomenology and the sublime which are expressed in the exhibition, using sculptural and photographic media. Special acknowledgement is given to four contemporary artists who have influenced my work throughout my candidature: Lee Ufan, Cornelia Parker, Antony Gormley and Anish Kapoor.



# 1. LIGHTNESS OF BEING

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This chapter will address the strategies I have used to articulate the lightness I require in my sculptural expressions of “lightness of being” while at the same time not surrendering the formal qualities of the work. The main component of my work consists of boulders and rock structures (both real and faux), at times combined with the human form or references to the human form. I use these objects because rocks refer directly to weight, burden and impact and as such are a perfect metaphor for the importance and legacy of our existence. Their origin can relate to time, place and movement, which has the potential to convey the underlying subject of migration. Rocks can be combined with the human form or an allusion to the human form to express strength, weakness and fragility and as such comment on the prospect of existence carrying weight. On their own they possess the phenomenological and sometimes sublime quality I need to express my concept. Phenomenologically, they are perceived as being heavy (they almost *are* weight) and in their presence – especially when they are gigantic – we experience those feelings of fragility and insignificance evoked by the sublime. Early in my candidature, I experimented with using rocks on a much smaller scale and in a rather literal way in figurative sculptures. These figures, produced

between 2008 and 2010 all carried seemingly impossible burdens in the form of rocks in their hands or on their backs.



Fig. 1

Marika Osmotherly, *Unbearable* (2008)  
Bronze, sandstone, 40cm



Fig. 2

Marika Osmotherly, *Unbearable* (2009)  
Bronze, wood, polystyrene, 25cm

Within this early body of work, I sensed an inexorable progression taking place, illustrated in the examples above and below, where in the more recent works the stones gradually increased in size while the figure became relatively smaller, thereby dramatically enhancing the expression of weight and fragility.



Fig. 3  
Marika Osmotherly, *Unbearable Lightness* (2010)  
Bronze, stone, wood, 30cm

I recognized there was a need to adjust the dimensions I was working with and that I had to minimise the use of the figure even more, as the way I was expressing myself was too literal. Eventually the figure became abstracted and was replaced with an allusion to the human form in the shape of a small twig. A twig, being the new growth of a woody plant, represents evolution and renewal and is a useful representation for the lightness of human existence.

To express my concepts properly, I realised that the relatively small dimensions did not carry enough impact; I needed to start working on a much larger scale. My initial efforts to construct giant rocks out of almost weightless materials were severely hampered by practical and financial restrictions. The method I used initially did not produce an accurate representation of the actual object – the rocks did not look realistic enough. I started the first construction using a wire frame that I covered in papier-maché. The surface was treated with textured paint and

sand and although the rock was very light, the not quite convincing end result was not acceptable as it did not appear heavy enough. The structure was also not stable or strong enough to allow for installation as a suspended element. It kept collapsing into an unnatural shape every time it was moved. The best outcome would have been achieved through the use of silicon rubber moulds taken from real rock structures but financially that was not an option because of the enormous amounts of rubber needed to allow for the scale of the work. The next best thing was a technique I picked up after consulting Keith Tutor, an Australian landscape gardener who specialises in constructing artificial boulders and rocks for use in gardens and around pools.<sup>10</sup> He was kind enough to agree to an informal chat about his practice and gave me tips on the textures and colours he uses on his man-made boulders. He primarily uses concrete in his constructions but also some lighter materials like cloth. Experimenting with this newly acquired knowledge, I used cement and different painterly finishing methods to reproduce the look of stone. The realism was much more successful but the work was becoming too heavy, with the added weight of the concrete, for it to be used in the intended way.

For inspiration, I looked to a range of artists and their processes to assist my practice. One American artist who has managed to “float” her sculptures very successfully is Janet Echelman (born 1966). Originally a painter, she started working with fishing nets whilst doing a residency in India.<sup>11</sup> Left without any

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<sup>10</sup> Keith Tutor Master of Artificial Rock  
<http://www.keithtutor.com/> [accessed on 19/05/10]

<sup>11</sup> Regina Frank, “Sculpting Urban Airspace; Janet Echelman”, *Sculpture*, Sept 2011, v30 n7, pp22-27

materials when a shipment of supplies went missing, she turned to the local fishermen and their fishing nets for inspiration. This initially romantic, contemplative and meditative way of hand-knotting the nets has since turned into a major business undertaking. Some of her installations span more than 75,000 square feet.<sup>12</sup> She constructs floating sculptures from colourful nets which are suspended in the urban environment. They are monumental in size and with an apparent graceful effortlessness they defy gravity as they dance and flutter in the wind, conveying a sublime experience.<sup>13</sup> Responding to the forces of nature, such as gravity and wind, her works impart a sense of the insignificance of human presence compared to these larger agents.

Fig. 4

Janet Echelman, *Her secret is patience* (2009)

Painted galvanised steel, polyester twine netting, coloured lights

Image available on: <http://archinect.com/people/project/27907236/her-secret-is-patience-phoenix-civic-space-sculpture/35441197>

Using totally opposite materials, conceptions of reality are questioned in Giuseppe Penone's (born 1947) work. This artist creates conceptual sculpture that concerns itself with man and nature and is highly tactile. In his words: "It is not a work of representation but of materials".<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Regina Frank, "Sculpting Urban Airspace; Janet Echelman", *Sculpture*, Sept 2011, v30 n7, pp22-27

<sup>13</sup> Janet Echelman: Taking imagination seriously  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/janet\\_echelman.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/janet_echelman.html) [accessed on 26/07/11]

<sup>14</sup> Karlyn de Jongh, "Simple Things and Natural Actions; a conversation with Giuseppe Penone", *Sculpture*, March 2011, v30, n2, p28

Fig. 5  
Giuseppe Penone, *Idee di pietra* (2003)  
Bronze and stone

Image available at: [http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/news/nathan/documenta-13-2012\\_detail.asp?picnum=7](http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/news/nathan/documenta-13-2012_detail.asp?picnum=7)

He was connected to the Arte Povera<sup>15</sup> (literally *poor art*) movement: an Italian influential avant-garde movement that developed towards the end of the 1960s. According to Penone man is nature and nature itself would be the perfect work. At the same time, art is language and therefore deemed imperfect. To him it is a means to affirm one's identity and his art attempts to understand and reflect on reality. The work often consists of already existing forms and natural materials like wood and stone which he aims to use and reveal in new ways.<sup>16</sup> His use of materials has captured my interest and has supported the development of my work.

In a different vein, contemporary sculptor Blane De St. Croix has, since the early 1990s, explored the geopolitical landscape. He creates large sculptural installations (realistically hand-crafted landscapes) with a combination of industrial and natural materials and aims at a better understanding of our shared social, political, environmental and cultural climate. His interest lies in articulating human aspiration to take command over our earth, revealing distinct environmental, political and personal conflicts.<sup>17</sup> His installations are very large-scale and operate in architectural space in a powerful and imposing fashion. Much

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<sup>15</sup> Coined by Italian art historian Germano Celant (born 1940), it is considered an unconventional, revolutionary art, free of the power of structure and the market place. The artists often used natural, found objects and commonplace materials (such as earth, rocks, rope and paper) that could suggest a pre-industrial era. The mainly sculptural movement was a reaction against modernist abstract painting that dominated European art during the 1950s. American Minimalism was also rejected, especially what was perceived as enthusiasm for technology.

<sup>16</sup>Karlyn de Jongh, "Simple Things and Natural Actions; a conversation with Giuseppe Penone", *Sculpture*, March 2011, v30, n2, pp25-31

<sup>17</sup> FAU Faculty Spotlight - Blane De St. Croix, MFA  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHnyVYEdPVc> [accessed on 12/10/2012]

of his work is site-specific and he draws on broad research, including site visits, photographic documentation, drawings and satellite imagery.<sup>18</sup> Elements of both the sublime and phenomenology are evident in his large-scale mountain ranges and in their presence our aspirations of taking command over our earth are quashed.

Fig. 6

Blane de St Croix, *Mountain strip* (2009)

Materials unknown

Image available at: <http://blanedestcroix.com/2013/01/09/mountain-strip/>

The artists mentioned manage to make us feel reduced to insignificance through the sheer size and impact of their work, something I too attempt to achieve. Eventually, after considering many different processes, the most practical outcome for constructing the largest rock was achieved through the use of a polystyrene block that I shaped to resemble a boulder. Several layers of paint, sand and oxides were used to produce a convincing surface. The second, slightly smaller rock that juts out of the wall, I built using fibreglass. The finishing technique was very similar to the technique used for the larger one. Although the resulting boulders are definitely useful, this whole process was still too cost-prohibitive to construct more than one of each. I had to therefore rethink how to express the same notions without compromising my ideas and in the end decided to turn to nature itself. The next plan of action was to explore the bush, beach and desert environment to find large, overhanging rock structures that would be suitable for expressing my concept of “lightness of being”. I carried a bundle of

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<sup>18</sup> Jill Connor, “A Conversation with Blane de St. Croix: Uneven Terrain”, *Sculpture*, Dec 2011, v30 n10, pp16-23

fragile sticks and twigs with me to use as a seemingly too delicate support for the enormous weight resting on them. In the resulting photographs the heavy rocks and boulders appear to be held up by these delicate components. The weight of the rock becomes the metaphor for the importance of our existence and in that way the little twig conveys the notion of our strength despite our apparent fragility.



Fig. 7  
Marika Osmotherly, *study* (2010)  
Rock, stick, sand

In order to make some reference to my Dutch heritage without the work becoming too steeped in the migrant issue, I decided to paint the sticks orange which also alludes to and fits in the Australian landscape (like the iron-infused dirt of the outback). Andy Goldsworthy (born 1956) used this colour very effectively in a work he did at Mount Victor Station in South Australia in 1991. He covered the



north side of a mulga tree with damp, red sand and facing the midday sun the tree almost lit up against a sky of black clouds.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the physical and financial problems that I encountered along the way, I was able to resolve the issue of scale by using lightweight materials and photographic documentation of the sculptural work done in the field. The largest rock constructed from polystyrene is light enough to be suspended from the ceiling above a chair, using thin, orange rope. I managed to construct an adequate hanging mechanism for the slightly smaller rock that juts out of the wall. It is strong enough to keep the piece securely on the wall without showing gaps, necessary to give a realistic feel. The smaller works were less of a challenge, and I am happy with the convincing look of the smaller constructed rocks. The photographs depict the concept in a two-dimensional form and the large print on the far wall of the gallery is intended to evoke a sense of flimsy, threatened equilibrium via the bending twig supporting a rock face. A more detailed description of the exhibition is given in chapter six.

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<sup>19</sup> Andy Goldsworthy, *Stone*, Viking, London, 1994, p 55

## 2. ETERNAL RECURRENCE

*It is a world in which, because everything occurs only once and then disappears into the past, existence seems to lose its substance and weight.*

*Milan Kundera*

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As previously noted, this paper was also inspired by Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.<sup>20</sup> This book is a poignant, sophisticated novel of political analysis and hypothetical philosophy that examines the essential mysteries of existence. It primarily concerns itself with conflicting emotional, physical, and metaphysical aspects of human existence and relationships.<sup>21</sup> The distinctly political side of the story is of less relevance to this paper and I will focus on the philosophical aspects of the book. The novel opens with a discussion of Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) asserts that human existence will only achieve meaning through the ceaseless repetition of events in our life; he proclaims that by reliving our experiences and the consequences of our choices, life will transcend its apparent ephemeral nature.<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche expands on this subject in his provocative allegory *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883-1885):

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<sup>20</sup> Milan Kundera, *the Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Faber and Faber, London, 1985

<sup>21</sup> Bob Corbett, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being", *Perennial Classics*, New York, Oct 2001, p23

<sup>22</sup> Philip J. Kain, "Nietzsche, Eternal Recurrence, and the Horror of Existence", *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, New York, Spring 2007, pp49-63

This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought.... The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over and over, and you with it, a grain of dust.<sup>23</sup>

Nietzsche declares that eternal recurrence is simply the notion that in the past everything has already happened for an eternity and will eternally continue to happen over and over again. He makes us draw attention away from any territories other than the one we currently live in, for eternal recurrence prevents the option of escape from the present world. His theory also functions as a measure of our overall mental health and psychological strength because Nietzsche believed that eternal recurrence was one of the most difficult world-views to uphold. He believed that long-term progress was severely hampered by his theory and that the restrictions of our human condition are something we should learn to live with.<sup>24</sup>

In my sculptural work recurrence is represented by a sculpture consisting of a row of river stones, supported by small orange twigs presented on a shelf.



Fig. 8  
Marika Osmotherly, *study* (2012)  
River stones, twigs

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<sup>23</sup>Philip J. Kain, "Nietzsche, Eternal Recurrence, and the Horror of Existence", *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, New York, Spring 2007, pp49-63

<sup>24</sup>Arthur C. Danto, "The End of Art: a Philosophical Defence", *History and Theory*, Dec 1998, v37 n4, pp127-143

A series of small photographs similarly refers to the repetitive nature of the theory. The installation also includes a digital presentation of images taken during my research in the field. It is shown on a continuous loop so it can “recur eternally”.

Kundera’s world is one in which existence seems to lose its substance and weight because everything occurs only once and then disappears into the past. He convinces us that any view of the recurrence is metaphorical rather than real or metaphysical. To avoid adopting the nihilistic belief that life is pointless and human values are worthless, we need to give our acts weight (meaning) in life by realising they need to recur eternally in a world without direction, meaning or sense. The author seems to accept Nietzsche’s theoretical argument that, to survive existential meaninglessness, eternal recurrence is instrumental but then argues that this survival itself is impossible, for, according to him, eternal recurrence cannot and does not happen.<sup>25</sup> However, I believe it can be argued that through eternal recurrence our acts become less rather than more significant. An endlessly repeated act would, with every repetition, lose some of its impact until it became irrelevant. Does not the relevance of an act that is repeated infinitely therefore become a grain of dust in Nietzsche’s own hourglass?

Weight is used as a metaphor for fate and responsibility in Kundera’s novel. The expression *Einmal ist Keinmal* (literally translated: *once is never*) is used by one of the main characters, Tomas, who is married to Teresa but has sexual relations

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<sup>25</sup>Bob Corbett, “The Unbearable Lightness of Being”, *Perennial Classics*, New York, Oct 2001, p2

with a multitude of women, indicating the struggle to find significance in existence.<sup>26</sup> A lack of responsibility results in an absence of weight, a lightness of being. This is illustrated by protagonists Tomas and Teresa who have fled to Switzerland after the Russian invasion of the Czech Republic. After a while Teresa returns to Prague when she no longer can put up with Tomas's endless infidelities. Tomas must then make the decision to either: be responsible and stay in Zurich (where he is free to practice medicine, free from political dictatorship and from the burdens of a relationship), or: return to Prague to be with Teresa again. Tomas, confronted by these choices, decides *Es muß sein (It must be)* and returns to Teresa with a feeling of lightness. He is yielding to fate by not taking any responsibilities for his actions. Kundera implies that Tomas's life is unbearably light as the condition of fate to the author is "arbitrary, inadvisable and unjustifiable".<sup>27</sup>

The following passage from Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* illustrates whether or not our human "being" or "existence" on this earth can carry weight (significant meaning, impact), which is the central theme that runs through this novel and something I thoroughly identify with as a migrant.

...and liked [this country], but only on the surface. Everything beneath the surface was alien to her. .... She was afraid of shutting herself into a grave and sinking into [this country's] earth. And so one day she composed a will in which she requested that her dead body be cremated and its ashes thrown to the winds. .... She wanted to die under the sign of lightness. She would be lighter than air.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Bob Corbett, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being", *Perennial Classics*, New York, Oct 2001, p23

<sup>27</sup>Randall Everett Allsup, "Music Education as Liberatory Practice: Exploring the Ideas of Milan Kundera", *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, Spring 2001, v9 n2, pp3-10

<sup>28</sup>Milan Kundera, *the Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Faber and Faber, London, 1985, p273

This passage highlights feelings of otherness and alienation that may become apparent on deeper reflection on migrating to another country. It also suggests a possible connection of the sublime to the migration experience. There is a definite feeling of excitement and wonder connected to moving to a different place, often combined with a real terror and fear of the new, the unexpected and the unknown. One of the early writers on the sublime, Edmund Burke (1729-1797), argued that our sense of the sublime is ingrained in our instinct for self-preservation and fear of death; emotions that are conceivably connected with a move to another country.<sup>29</sup>

After reading Kundera's book, various existential questions related to the possibility of our "being" or "existence" carrying metaphorical weight keep emerging. The fact that I am a migrant has also influenced this way of thinking significantly. Questions relating to movement, mobility and fluidity and belonging in either one place or another, query notions of grounding, impact and weight. Are we meant to feel a sense of belonging in our country of birth only or is it possible that we can belong in more than one place at a time? Alternatively, rather than just place, belonging may actually have a stronger link to relationships we forge and the people who play a significant part in our lives. Perhaps it is more valid to argue that belonging comes from within our "being" and that it is the solid connections we have built with people close to us, which are the essential factor in the idea of belonging rather than merely place alone.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Crowther (ed.), *The contemporary sublime: sensibilities of transcendence and shock*, Academy editions, London, 1995, p58

<sup>30</sup> Dr. Linn Miller's thesis discusses "the nature and significance of *belonging* and its intersection with human identity and being in the world." *Being and Belonging*, Linn Miller, 2006  
<http://eprints.utas.edu.au/7952/1/01frontMiller.pdf> [accessed on 09/04/12]

Lecturer in philosophy and research fellow at the University of Tasmania, Dr.

Linn Miller states:

If we accept that what is at stake in the question of belonging is our identity as persons..., then looking *outside* of the self *to something else* for belonging will not do. What is needed to properly articulate belonging is a model that presents a relational account of being in the world and an ontological structure that allows us to see belonging from the inside, so to speak.<sup>31</sup>

She considers the belonging relation not only to pertain within place but somehow also *within* the self.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from a feeling of belonging to create significance in our existence, Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence suggests that our acts should be repeated endlessly in order to give them importance and weight. In my view, endlessly repeated acts eventually become less, rather than more, significant and this thought seems to be supported by Milan Kundera, even though he accepts the basic idea that to ward off nihilistic views of the world, acts do need to recur eternally. His view of eternal recurrence is metaphorical; he believes this cannot and does not happen and that therefore surviving existential meaninglessness is not possible. If it is not possible for endlessly repeated acts to create a more significant existence and our sense of belonging is brought into question by the relevance of our connection to place, the question then remains: what is it that adds meaning to our existence?

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<sup>31</sup> Being and Belonging, Linn Miller, 2006  
<http://eprints.utas.edu.au/7952/1/01frontMiller.pdf> [accessed on 09/04/12]

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

### 3. EXISTENCE AND BEING

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**B**efore examining the possibility of “existence” and “being” carrying weight it is imperative that we look at what these notions are or what we understand them to be. Being is one of those words that is frequently used in philosophy but infrequently understood. This is partly because it is something that we cannot define; it exceeds all of our resources in our attempts to describe it. Being could hesitantly be suggested to be that which allows existence to be possible at all.<sup>33</sup>

When we ask ontological questions about the nature of being and the meaning of life we are generally looking at philosophical matters regarding the significance and purpose of existence in general. This concept can be expressed through related questions, such as “Why are we here?” and “What is the meaning of life?”

Throughout history there has been much scientific, philosophical, and theological speculation about the potential answers to these existential questions. Notions such as happiness, consciousness, good and evil, moral values, the soul, God and

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<sup>33</sup> Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961)  
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/merleau/#SH3a> [accessed on 19/06/12]



the afterlife are all closely related to the discussion about what existence means and have been the main focus of philosophical thought about existence throughout the ages.

I have found the following philosophers' speculations on human existence of interest. Leszlek Kolakowski (1927-2009) is best known for his critical analysis of Marxist thought<sup>34</sup>. According to him, human beings are self-aware and therefore unable to explain their self-consciousness (or themselves as conscious beings) as merely another part of nature. They are compelled to interpret their existence in the natural world and to look behind nature for their *raison d'être*, as consciousness itself seems to transcend nature as a territory of objects of knowledge. Humans are unable to know themselves knowing, cannot simultaneously be the object and the subject of knowing.<sup>35</sup> Kolakowski therefore suggests that it would be impossible for self-conscious human beings to understand their own "being". Alternatively, A.C. Grayling (born 1949) provides a fairly uncomplicated answer to my question: "How do we as humans find direction or purpose in a difficult and confusing world?". When asked what the meaning of life is, he answers that it is the meaning that we ourselves impose on it. We all have different dreams and talents and the purpose of an individual life, according to Grayling, lies in the aims we set for ourselves. What we need to do is consider what it is we want to achieve and in what way we are capable of doing so

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<sup>34</sup> He wrote a three-volume history on the subject (Leszlek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Vol. I: The Founders. Vol. II: The Golden Age. Vol. III: The Breakdown*, Oxford University Press, 1978), first published in Polish in 1976

<sup>35</sup> Elkins, James, "Reenchantment", Routledge, New York, 2009, p13

within our own values. The pursuit of these values then is what makes our lives good, meaningful and fulfilling to live.<sup>36</sup> Apart from these metaphysical reflections, a more scientific approach to philosophy is taken by Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)<sup>37</sup> and some years later by W.V. Quine (1908-2000)<sup>38</sup>. These philosophers were both associated with the term analytic philosophy. Analytic philosophy is a broad philosophical tradition that is characterised by a respect for the natural sciences and puts an emphasis on clarity and argument (often achieved through modern formal logic and analysis of language).<sup>39</sup> According to Scott Soames<sup>40</sup> the objective in analytic philosophy is to determine what is true and not to offer a convenient formula for living one's life.<sup>41</sup>

As a contrast we also need to look into purely scientific considerations on the subject. These include descriptive facts about the universe and human life, expanding our awareness and providing context. The question changes from “why?” in philosophy to “how?” in science. The evolution of science has provided us with new developments that have contributed to a change in our perception of the world. Through the invention of the microscope (and the telescope)<sup>42</sup> a whole new minute world inside the one we used to know was opened up to be discovered. Suddenly there was evidence of an enormous number

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<sup>36</sup> The Meaning of Life: An interview with Professor A. C. Grayling  
<http://freethinker.co.uk/2010/02/22/the-meaning-of-life-an-interview-with-professor-a-c-grayling/>  
[accessed on 11/11/11]

<sup>37</sup> Along with his counterparts German Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) and Austrian-British Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)

<sup>38</sup> He occupied himself with theoretical philosophy and logic.

<sup>39</sup> Preston, Aaron, *Analytic Philosophy*, Continuum International Publishing Group, London, 2007, pp105-118 (E-book)

<sup>40</sup> Scott Soames (born 1946) is a professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California who specialises in the philosophy of language and the history of analytic philosophy.

<sup>41</sup> Scott Soames, *Understanding Truth*, Oxford University Press, Nov 1998

<sup>42</sup> In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century

of other organisms and forms of life that we never knew about, changing our notions of being or existing on this earth and within the universe. Around 1590 the Dutch spectacle-makers Hans and Zacharius Janssen invented the earliest microscopes.<sup>43</sup> The social and cultural effect of this invention has been the discovery of a whole new, minuscule world. An enormous variety of microorganisms were revealed through this possibility of magnification.<sup>44</sup> Antoni Van Leeuwenhoek<sup>45</sup> (1632-1723) discovered many new life forms through the use of the microscope including single-celled organisms, bacteria, blood corpuscles, striation in skeletal muscle, the structure of nerves and spermatozoa.<sup>46</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, telescopes (also invented by the Dutch in the early seventeenth century) started to reveal the secrets of the universe beyond the visible range of the human eye. Italian scientist Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) created a telescope with an increased magnification of x20. He used it to look at the sky and discovered a large number of previously unseen stars; he also noticed the irregular surface of the moon, the rings around Saturn, the fact that Jupiter had four moons and that the sun was spotty and impure (sunspots).<sup>47</sup> The curiosity generated by this enhanced understanding of our universe ultimately led to the development of the space programs of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. All this new speculation and knowledge was adding to the philosophical questions of wonder and awe that surround our existence rather than providing the answers we were searching for. It led to a fundamental shift from the religious view that we as

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<sup>43</sup> Van Zuylen, J., "The microscopes of Antoni van Leeuwenhoek", *Journal of Microscopy*, March 1981, v121, n3, pp309-328

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Dutch scientist, considered to be the first microbiologist

<sup>46</sup> Van Zuylen, J., "The microscopes of Antoni van Leeuwenhoek", *Journal of Microscopy*, March 1981, v121, n3, pp309-328

<sup>47</sup> Van Helden, Albert, "The `Astronomical Telescope,' 1611-1650," *Annali dell'Istituto e Museo di Storia della Scienza di Firenze*, 1976, v1, n2, pp13-36

humans occupy the centre of the universe to a secular awareness that we are merely a speck on the outer edge of one of countless galaxies.<sup>48</sup> This realisation made a considerable contribution to thoughts of human insignificance.

As a result of the developing science of microscopy in the eighteenth century a division was created between simply “curious”, pleasurable *watching* and a much more rational, language-driven *observing*.<sup>49</sup> The indiscriminating preoccupation with the merely visual was questioned and this resulted in a much greater conscious awareness of our environment. Our increased perceptual expertise enabled us to make highly informed (and therefore responsible) judgements on aesthetics.<sup>50</sup> This discerning observation became especially relevant during the construction of my imitation rocks, particularly in my attempt to trick the viewer’s eye convincingly.

Our expanded perception of the things that surround us, how they appear in our own experience and what meaning they have to us in our daily life, makes us question the relevance and truth of what we see. This perceptive consciousness then leads us into the realm of phenomenology.

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<sup>48</sup> Bill Bryson (ed.), *Seeing Further: The Story of Science and the Royal Society*, HarperPress, U.K., 2010 (E-book), Chapter 14 by Paul Davies

<sup>49</sup> Barbara Maria Stafford, “Voyeur or Observer? Enlightenment Thoughts on the Dilemmas of Display”, *Configurations*, n1 v1, 1993, pp95-128

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

## 4. PHENOMENOLOGY

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Phenomenology can be defined as a broad philosophical movement that studies the appearance of things in our own lived experience. Literally, the word is derived from the Greek words *phainómenon* (that which appears) and *lógos* (word, discourse). It explores the way we experience things first-hand (objects, events, time, the self and others) and therefore the meanings that things have in our conscious experience.<sup>51</sup>

I am interested in the phenomenological premise that our reality consists of objects as they are perceived or understood in our own, personal consciousness made up by our thoughts, memories, ideas and images. This individual reality is subject to various personal interpretations without insisting on a universal truth. This relates directly to my work where the viewer is seduced into believing that what is shown is real. Some of the rocks I include in my work are constructed in the studio and presented to be perceived as real, so in the viewer's eye they are "real". In saying that, I do acknowledge that there are individual variations of

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<sup>51</sup> David Woodruff Smith, Amie L. Thomasson, (eds.), *Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005, p1

perception and some viewers will accept an imposed reality more eagerly than others. Individual truth is an important part of our valuation of art objects we, the viewer, are presented with. We measure the physical presence, aesthetics and concept of the work from an individual perspective and assess its value in that way.



Fig. 9  
Marika Osmotherly, Rock (2012)  
Polystyrene

This individual perspective fits in with the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard<sup>52</sup> (1813-1855), whose work deals with how one lives as a “single individual”; the “self” being superior to the group, highlighting the value of personal choice and commitment.<sup>53</sup> His attitude was that “the crowd is untruth”. In this instance, the crowd can be understood to be public opinion in the broadest sense. It represents the ordinary, generally accepted way of acting – conformity – which creates a complacent attitude. In the situation of individual reality the individual is forced

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<sup>52</sup>Danish Christian philosopher sometimes called *father of existentialism*

His *Afsluttende Uvidenskabelig Efterskrift (Concluding Unscientific Postscript)* (1846) describes the possibility of a life lived by faith in the modern world through emphasis on the importance of the individual and the development of the concept of subjective truth.

<sup>53</sup>Tuttle, Howard N., *The Crowd is Untruth: the Existential Critique of Mass Society in the Thought of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Ortega y Gasset*, Peter Lang, New York, 1995, pp. xii, xiii

to re-evaluate their beliefs; they have to take responsibility for their own observation and analysis of life. Confronted with challenging situations, the weak may feel overwhelmed by nihilism and the realisation that life has no intrinsic meaning; they may turn into victims of despair. However, the creative and strong may feel liberated and see an opportunity to take responsibility for bringing meaning into their life by adjusting their values.<sup>54</sup>

Personal choice and individuality links to Edmund Husserl's<sup>55</sup> (1859-1938) phenomenology of embodiment, where the body we inhabit is a lived centre of experience. Both the body's ability to move, and to register sensations, played a major role in Husserl's explanation of how we encounter other embodied agents in a rational world and thus increase the awareness of our place in that world. Phenomenology turns directly to the first person subjective evidence of lived experience in order to provide consciousness of observations and objects as they are witnessed, rather than causal explanations.<sup>56</sup>

Phenomenology has been applied in many ways for centuries but since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it came into its own principally in the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.<sup>57</sup> It studies structures of consciousness as experienced from a first-person point of view and concerns itself with the Heideggerian relationship between *Being* (making sense of our ability to

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<sup>54</sup> Steven Crowell, Existentialism

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism> [accessed on 08/02/10]

<sup>55</sup> Edmund Husserl, German philosopher and mathematician, 1859-1938

<sup>56</sup> Welton, Don (ed.), *The essential Husserl*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1999, pp40-43

<sup>57</sup> The four most well-known of the classical phenomenological philosophers.

make sense of things)<sup>58</sup> and *Being-in-the-world* (also called Dasein<sup>59</sup>). Through the use of the expression “Dasein”, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) drew attention to the fact that a human being can only be taken into account as having an existence in the middle of a world that he has to make sense of rather than standing alone as an isolated entity.<sup>60</sup>

While he was not the first person to use the term phenomenology, Husserl has been described as the “Father of Phenomenology”.<sup>61</sup> He argued that phenomenology did not reject the existence of the real world, but it attempted to clarify the *sense* of this world as actually existing. He made us consciously focus on fundamental structures we take for granted in our everyday world. He explained that this intentional consciousness should enable us to develop a totally unprejudiced justification of our basic views of the world and ourselves and explore their rational interconnections.<sup>62</sup> In contrast, to get to the truest form of subjective perception Husserl used eidetic phenomenological reduction<sup>63</sup>: he strove to suspend judgement of the natural world by moving from a visual memory to a realm of essences. He called this “bracketing away”;

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<sup>58</sup> Dreyfus, Hubert L., *Being-in-the-world: a Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991, p10

<sup>59</sup> German word used by Heidegger in his work *Being and Time*. It translates to everyday human existence and relates to *being* in its ontological and philosophical sense.

Dreyfus, Hubert L., *Being-in-the-world: a Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991, p13

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p24

<sup>61</sup> Polkinghorne, Donald, *Methodology for the human sciences: Systems of inquiry*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1983 and Scruton, Roger, *A short history of modern philosophy: From Descartes to Wittgenstein*, Routledge, New York, 1995

<sup>62</sup> Christian Beyer, Edmund Husserl

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/husserl/> [accessed on 07/10/10]

<sup>63</sup> Eidetic: involving extraordinarily accurate and vivid recall, especially of visual images  
Husserl, Edmund, (Translated by W. R. Boyce Gibson), *Ideas : General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, Collier, Macmillan, New York, London, 1962, p85



disconnecting.<sup>64</sup> It suggests a temporary removal of speculation, inessential aspects, context and symbolic meaning, returning the subject to its basic elements; leaving only the core. This allows phenomena to be perceived in their truest, purest form.<sup>65</sup>

In the phenomenological process we objectify the world by setting ourselves apart from it. This practice creates a gap – a distance in space which we attempt to bridge through means like perception, bodily actions, remembering and evaluating.<sup>66</sup> Our five senses and the imagination are essential to perception. The synchronised functioning of our senses presents us with information about the here and now. While hearing can be achieved in the space where the body is either present or around a corner, some distance away impermeable to sight, seeing must happen in direct connection with the body, regardless of distance (we can see the moon but not around corners). Through combining all data received we achieve a sense of place in the world.<sup>67</sup>

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was one of Husserl's pupils at the Sorbonne University in Paris. Both linked consciousness to intentionality, which has been defined as "aboutness".<sup>68</sup> Aboutness has the property of being about a subject or

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<sup>64</sup> Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: Edmund Husserl  
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/husserl/> [accessed on 08/08/12]

<sup>65</sup> Husserl, Edmund, (Translated by W. R. Boyce Gibson), *Ideas : General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, Collier, Macmillan, New York, London, 1962, p86

<sup>66</sup> Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape, Places, Paths and Monuments*, Berg Publishers, Oxford, UK, 1994, p12

<sup>67</sup> Rob van Gerwen, Philosophical Directions, the effort of understanding  
<http://www.phil.uu.nl/staff/rob/directions/art.shtm> [accessed on 19/07/09]

<sup>68</sup> Searle, John R., *Intentionality; an essay in the philosophy of mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p1

directed toward it, as characteristic in conscious states of the mind. It is the process of abstraction of input (representation) and concretisation of output by which the brain attains understanding and awareness of the environment.<sup>69</sup> Husserl believed consciousness to be *fundamentally* intentionality.<sup>70</sup> Sartre took this a step further and declared consciousness to be *purely* intentionality;<sup>71</sup> an activity that is directed at the world. He understood consciousness to be active and essentially critical and to consist not only of perception, thoughts, and ideas but equally of desire, emotions, impulses, and imagination, contradicting the world as it is. He argued that our perceptions of the world are always infused by our imagination and because of this we are aware of choices and alternatives. He celebrated our extraordinary freedom to imagine the world different to what it actually is.<sup>72</sup>

Heidegger also influenced Sartre to a great extent but in his essay *L'être et le Néant* (1943)<sup>73</sup> Sartre became sceptical of Heidegger's attack on the Cartesian view of consciousness. He analysed two distinct and complex categories of being: the "being-in-itself" (*en-soi*) and the "being-for-itself" (*pour-soi*). These terms can be roughly explained as the non-conscious and conscious respectively. He argued that consciousness ("being-for-itself") is more akin to being an activity, not a thing or a substance. He described consciousness (transcendence) to be in a state of cohabitation with our material body (facticity) but that it has no objective

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<sup>69</sup> Ronald McIntyre and David Woodruff Smith, "Theory of Intentionality", in J. N. Mohanty and William R. McKenna, (eds.), *Husserl's Phenomenology: a Textbook*, Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology and University Press of America, Washington D.C., 1989, p149

<sup>70</sup> Sartre's Concept of Intentionality, Pang Peipei,, University of Tokyo, 2009

[http://utcp.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/events/pdf/026\\_Pang\\_Peipei\\_3rd\\_BESETO.pdf](http://utcp.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/events/pdf/026_Pang_Peipei_3rd_BESETO.pdf)

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> The English translation *Being and Nothingness* was first published in 1956

reality (“no-thing”). The mixture of transcendence and facticity form a “situation”. We are always beings “in situation”. Sartre concluded that therefore we are always more than merely our situation and that this is the ontological basis of our freedom. We are, in his words, “condemned to be free”<sup>74</sup>. Consequently, Heidegger's “being-in-the-world” phenomenon gave way to a conflicting representation of human consciousness resisting and challenging the world.

Like Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) believed the body to be the primary location of understanding of the world, as opposed to the philosophical tradition of putting consciousness first as the source of knowledge.<sup>75</sup> His vision was that the body and its perceptions could not be separated. He based his phenomenology on what he called the “primacy of perception”. This refers to the foundational role perception plays in knowing and understanding the world as well as engaging with it.<sup>76</sup> In his writings he mentions “dialectical imagination”, which is marked by a drive towards synthesis and synergy (combined action or functioning, creating an enhanced combined effect).<sup>77</sup> He believed that imagination can have privileged access to the hidden dimensions of being – to what he also calls “the invisible”: something that can be imagined but cannot be seen; something that is non-existent but pre-exists in the visible. For

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<sup>74</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*  
From: *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, trans. Walter Kaufman  
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm> [accessed on 07/08/12]

<sup>75</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Nonsense*, Northwestern University Press, Evanstone, Illinois, 1964, p33

<sup>76</sup> Johnson, Galen A., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1993, p8

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, pp28-31

Merleau-Ponty every visible dimension of being correlates to an invisible or imaginary dimension.<sup>78</sup>

#### 4.1 Phenomenology in Art

A distinguishing feature of the existential-phenomenological tradition in philosophy (the convention of philosophers influenced by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre) is a profound engagement with the fine arts. These philosophers believe that good works of art can show us phenomena more directly and powerfully than any philosophical writing.<sup>79</sup> For example, Robert Lazzarini<sup>80</sup> (born 1965) tricks our perception by altering familiar objects, effectively confusing visual space.

Fig. 10  
Robert Lazzarini, *Payphone* (2002)  
Payphone materials  
Image available at: <http://www.thecityreview.com/biennial.html>

He uses three-dimensional computer software to distort and construct his sculptures. Offering no ideal point of view, he compels the disoriented viewer to walk around the work in order to find a direction from which it makes sense. The use of the original materials to fabricate the distorted objects reminds the spectator of their ordinary, everyday existence. His sculptures refer back to phenomenology

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<sup>78</sup> Hutchinson, Gombrich, Njatin, Mitchell, *Antony Gormley*, Phaidon Press Ltd, London, 2000, p42

<sup>79</sup> Parry, Joseph D., *Art and Phenomenology*, Routledge, London and New York, 2011, p9

<sup>80</sup> American sculptor whose work questions the truth of our perception.

being introduced into the discourse of art, the 1960s and minimalism.<sup>81</sup> Abstraction was the fundamental rule for minimalism. It attempted to convey metaphysical purity and moved into a kind of phenomenological formalism where the body quantified the work as much as the eye. Engagements with the process of gravity, construction and literal space replaced the exclusively optical.<sup>82</sup> These three factors also play a major role in my sculpture, where the viewer is drawn into an engagement with the work as it appears. The gravitational pull of the apparently heavy, polystyrene rock suspended above the chair invites the audience to assess the reality of the scene. Aforementioned Blane de St. Croix also distorts the real world with his sculptures. His mountain range installed upside down in the gallery challenges the viewer's reality and his miniature, very accurate, rock landscapes also test our perception of personal truth.

Another artist who, like his counterparts, was influenced by phenomenological theories was minimalist Robert Morris (born 1931).<sup>83</sup> Morris was particularly drawn to geometric works and used simple, regular and irregular polyhedrons, arguing that these forms established a "strong gestalt sensation" whereby the essence of form and shape could be grasped intuitively.<sup>84</sup> Annette Michelson<sup>85</sup> writes:

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<sup>81</sup> Blind Cut

<http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/blind-cut.php> [accessed on 14/04/12]

<sup>82</sup> Anna C. Chave, "Revaluing Minimalism: Patronage, Aura, and Place", *The Art Bulletin*, Sept 2008, v90 n3, pp466,467

<sup>83</sup> Robert Morris, "Words and Images in Modernism and Post-modernism", *Critical Inquiry*, v15 n2, Winter 1989, p343

<sup>84</sup> Meyer, James, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2001, p159

<sup>85</sup> Co-founder (with Rosalind Krauss) of the journal *October* and professor of Cinema Studies at New York University

Every aspect of that experience [‘confronting sculptures such as those by Robert Morris’s] – the ‘reduction’ on which it is posited, its reflexiveness, the manner in which it illuminates the nature of our feeling and knowing through an object, a spatial situation, suggests an aesthetic analogy to the posture and method of phenomenological inquiry, as it is familiar to us in the tradition of contemporary philosophy.<sup>86</sup>

Fig. 11

Robert Morris, installation in the Green Gallery, New York (1964)  
Grey painted plywood

Image available at: <http://ifacontemporary.wordpress.com/2012/04/04/robert-morris-in-the-guggenheims-panza-collection/>

Phenomenology is very relevant to my considerations on existence as our personal reality relies heavily on the thoughts, ideas and images we experience in our daily lives. We use this reality to make sense of the world that surrounds us. By distancing ourselves from our world we objectify it so we can understand it better. Sometimes objectification is hard to achieve, especially when our imagination takes over. Art can challenge us in this objectification and take us on a journey where we cannot make sense of what is presented. Our emotions become more intense and we can experience a far more subjective, emotional and sublime world that relates to the enigma of Kundera’s “unbearable lightness of being”.

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<sup>86</sup> Annette Michelson, ‘Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression’, *Robert Morris*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 1969, p43

## 5. INTO THE SUBLIME

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Researching and communicating the notion of *lightness of being* prompts dialogue about ways of transcending feelings of insignificance that may result from this philosophical premise. In order to create a meaningful existence that carries significance and weight we need enriching experiences, maybe even a higher power; something we can refer to as our reason for being. Religion may be an obvious example as sustenance for the spirit and the soul. Art and nature can also be sources of powerful aesthetic sentiment providing the intense emotions that take us to a higher plane and indicating a sense of moral significance in the face of the finite human condition. Closely connected to these inspiring and powerful influences is the concept of the sublime. The sublime relates directly to all these reflections and provides a method to overcome our feelings of insignificance, fear and fragility. I have attempted to convey this perception in both the sculptural and photographic elements of my exhibition where large rocks in both the natural environment and in the gallery are supported by fragile twigs.

The word “sublime” originated in a treatise titled *On the Sublime* ascribed to the Greek author Longinus (around 200 A.D.).

For, as if instinctively, our soul is uplifted by the true sublime; it takes a proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting; as though it had itself produced what it has heard.

Longinus<sup>87</sup>

Hence Longinus defined the sublime as setting itself apart from mere beauty and inducing far more intense emotions through the breathtaking, awe-inspiring qualities of vastness and enormity. While beauty might be found in the small, the smooth, the light or the ordinary, the sublime is infinite, obscure, irregular and phenomenal<sup>88</sup>, which ties in with the suspended rocks I have created. He also declared that a sublime experience may be generated by serial repetition.<sup>89</sup> This suggestion is reflected in Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence, discussed previously and something I have incorporated in both my sculptural and photographic work.

During the eighteenth century there was a gradual move from the "rhetorical" sublime of Longinus to the "natural" sublime. Grand or colossal natural phenomena can instigate sensations of terror, fear, human insignificance and other powerful emotions. Some argued nature to be the only subject capable of encompassing the sublime convincingly and that natural phenomena become inferior and feebler when rules of art are applied. The expression of the sublime according to Longinus is more exposed to risk when it takes its own route without guidance of the knowledge that art can provide. It often needs encouragement but

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<sup>87</sup> Harold Bloom, Blake Hobby (eds.), *The Sublime*, Infobase Publishing, New York, 2010, p90 (E-book)

<sup>88</sup> David Rodgers, The Sublime from a historical point of view  
<http://www.joh.net/phd/appendices/texts/sublimegove.html> [accessed on 15/06/09]

<sup>89</sup> Paul Crowther (ed.), *The Contemporary Sublime: sensibilities of transcendence and shock*, Academy editions, London, 1995, p26



it often needs restraint too. It is important, he states, that we remember the fact that there are certain expressive elements which are only found in nature but which can be learned from no other source than art.<sup>90</sup>

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) on the other hand believed that the notion of the sublime does not dwell in anything related to nature, but only in our own mind:

The mind feels itself set in motion in the representation of the sublime in nature... This movement, especially in its inception, may be compared with a vibration with a rapidly alternating repulsion and attraction produced by one and the same Object. The point of excess for the imagination is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself...

Kant<sup>91</sup>

He argued that the idea of the sublime in our own mind is cultivated by nature's power to influence our emotions by the depth of our experiences. Our imagination fails to contain the magnitude and immenseness of magnificent natural phenomena and this causes not only awe and wonder but, at the other end of the spectrum, pain and fear. The characteristic of sublime feeling is an oscillation between pain and pleasure and the realisation that it is in effect possible for us to overcome our fear through reason gives us great exaltation. Through this awareness we realise our superiority to nature.<sup>92</sup> In fact, for Kant, imaginative self-aggrandisement was the most satisfying aspect of the sublime experience. The sublime therefore confirms the desire for a superior subjectivity.<sup>93</sup> Kant's theory dealt with rational containment of excess which leads to a transcendence of

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<sup>90</sup> W. Rhys Roberts (ed.), *Longinus on the Sublime: The Greek Text Edited after the Paris Manuscript*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2011, pp26,43

<sup>91</sup> Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "Fear of Formalism: Kant, Twain, and Cultural Studies in American Literature", *Diacritics*, 1998, v27 n4, p56

<sup>92</sup> Lyotard on the Kantian sublime, Anthony David  
<http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Cont/ContDavi.htm> [accessed on 13/05/11]

<sup>93</sup> C. Christopher Soufas, "The Sublime, the Beautiful, and the Imagination in Zorrilla's Don Juan Tenorio", *MLN*, n2 v110, 1995, pp302-319

the mundane self. In contrast, Edmund Burke's existential theory on the sublime was structured around the positive significance of shock and horror.<sup>94</sup> Burke wrote *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* in 1756. Self-preservation and the love of society were identified as people's most important passions in life. Burke drew this distinction between the sublime and the beautiful: self-preservation was turned into a sublime delight as the result of a decrease in pain or terror, while beauty was the foundation of "positive and independent" pleasure. Consequently delight could actually occur through the contemplation of a terrifying situation – natural, artistic or intellectual – that could only harm the spectator in their imagination; the resulting imagery created an emotion far more intense than that obtained by mere beauty. It is "the strongest emotion the mind is able to feel", according to Burke.<sup>95</sup> As a result he rejected conventional theories that affirmed beauty to be the result of proportion, value or perfection.<sup>96</sup> He claimed that the sublime is enhanced by darkness, significance and a potential threat to individual existence as well as some kind of approach towards infinity, which again relates to Longinus's thought.<sup>97</sup>

The sublime continues to influence both contemporary philosophy and art. When discussing the contemporary sublime, Paul Crowther<sup>98</sup> (born 1953) refers back to both Burke and Kant.<sup>99</sup> In Burke's existential notion of the sublime the sensory overload of vast objects or the threat of dangerous ones shocks us into refreshing

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<sup>94</sup> Paul Crowther (ed.), *The Contemporary Sublime: sensibilities of transcendence and shock*, Academy editions, London, 1995, p17

<sup>95</sup> Anthony Quinton, "Burke on the Sublime and Beautiful", *Philosophy*, 1961, v36 n136, p72

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Paul Crowther (ed.), *The Contemporary Sublime: sensibilities of transcendence and shock*, Academy editions, London, 1995, p27

<sup>98</sup> He specialises in the fields of philosophy of art and aesthetics, metaphysics and visual culture.

<sup>99</sup> Paul Crowther (ed.), *The Contemporary Sublime: sensibilities of transcendence and shock*, Academy editions, London, 1995, pp10,11

our sense of being alive by creating “delightful horror”.<sup>100</sup> Kant determines the sublime in a relation between perceptual and imaginative excess and rational containment. Our rational capacities surpass the measurable world of nature, resulting in self-aggrandisement and confirmation of superior subjectivity.<sup>101</sup> Crowther adds that, to allow for the term “sublime” to be used in contemporary art, we must engage with works which test our perceptual or imaginative assets but also increase the opportunity for rational comprehension.<sup>102</sup>

An artist who has controversially played on the notion of self-preservation as acted upon by terror and fear is Damien Hirst (born 1965). His most famous work, a tank containing a pickled shark, enigmatically titled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), seems to echo Burke’s sentiments. The notorious work consists of a large tiger shark, floating and preserved in formaldehyde and put on display in an enormous glass cabinet that allows the audience to walk around it so the work can be viewed from every angle. The work activates a sublime feeling through emotional and visceral resonances that are provoked through our instinct of self-preservation when we view terrible objects or depictions. When we have determined there is no actual danger to the individual, emotions of respect, astonishment and awe are capable of producing some kind of “delightful horror”.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Paul Crowther (ed.), *The Contemporary Sublime: sensibilities of transcendence and shock*, Academy editions, London, 1995, pp10

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. p11

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. p17

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p57

Fig. 12  
Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*  
(1991)  
Shark, formaldehyde, steel and glass tank  
Image available at: <http://www.damienhirst.com/the-physical-impossibility-of>

The alternating repulsion and attraction caused by viewing this horrific image also fits in with Kant's theory on the emotion of experience that was discussed earlier.

Another name that has been linked to notions of the contemporary sublime is Bill Viola (born 1951). This artist encourages a meditative response from the audience by means of video imagery that encompasses darkness, repetitive imagery, slow-motion, sound and abstraction. This is especially evident in his exhibition of *The Passions* (2005)<sup>104</sup>. In the privacy of the darkness of the viewing rooms the spectator is left to contemplate the powerful metaphors of Viola's art, holding the viewer's gaze in a way few contemporary paintings can achieve. The addition of sound has a mesmerising effect.<sup>105</sup> A wonderful example, *Catherine's Room* (2001), is based on a 14<sup>th</sup>-century predella<sup>106</sup> by Italian painter Andrea di Bartolo. This beautifully contemplative work consists of five video panels reminiscent of early European devotional paintings and in them a woman dedicates herself to ordinary daily activities, completing them attentively.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2005

<sup>105</sup> Lucina Ward, Bill Viola: the Passions  
<http://nga.gov.au/viola/> [accessed on 13/05/12]

<sup>106</sup> The decorative base of an altarpiece, embellished with small paintings or sculptures

<sup>107</sup> Lucina Ward, Bill Viola: the Passions  
<http://nga.gov.au/viola/passions5.cfm> [accessed on 13/05/11]

Fig. 13  
Bill Viola, *Catherine's Room* (2001)  
Video installation  
Image available at:

[http://www.depont.info/en/collection/artists/artist/werk\\_id/405/kunstenaar/viola/](http://www.depont.info/en/collection/artists/artist/werk_id/405/kunstenaar/viola/)

Each scene shows the performance of a different task, from morning exercises through to lighting candles as it gets dark and going to bed at night. The tree outside the window indicates the different seasons thereby putting the woman's routine in the larger context of the cycles of nature. The video is shown in super slow-motion; so slowly that it forces the viewer to concentrate their gaze patiently on the sequence to catch the movement and the change in light.<sup>108</sup> The overpowering sensation of watching Viola's contemplative work often evokes our most elemental fears: the fear of nature and the environmental forces capable of random destruction such as wind, fire and water as illustrated below in a detail of *The Crossing* (1996). In it a man stands while seemingly being consumed by fire and drowned in a downpour of water. This work alarms us but, as we rationalise our fear, at the same time seduces us with its sublime power.<sup>109</sup>

Fig. 14  
Bill Viola, *The Crossing [detail]* (1996)  
Video installation  
Image available at:

[http://www.tokyoartbeat.com/tablog/entries.en/2006/11/interview\\_with\\_bill\\_viola.html](http://www.tokyoartbeat.com/tablog/entries.en/2006/11/interview_with_bill_viola.html)

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<sup>108</sup> Catherine's Room (2001)

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/viola-catherines-room-ar00042> [accessed on 06/04/12]

<sup>109</sup> David Packwood, "Saving Postmodernism's Soul: Bill Viola's *The Passions*", *The Art Book*, September 2004, v11, Issue 4, pp8-10

In Viola's own words:

The two traditional natural elements of fire and water appear here not only in their destructive aspects, but manifest their cathartic, purifying, transformative, and regenerative capacities as well. In this way, self-annihilation becomes a necessary means to transcendence and liberation.<sup>110</sup>

For Viola the sublime is linked to the abstract force of fire and water, the awesome power of natural forces and the impossibility of expressing death. The sublime nature of his work is further enhanced through the cyclical repetition of the image.<sup>111</sup>

In her article *The Elemental Sublime* (1997) Lisa Jaye Young, a New York-based art writer/curator, is of the opinion that film lends itself more suitably to the investigation of the sublime than other, more traditional forms of art like painting and sculpture which have definite physical boundaries. She argues that if Kant stated that beauty is connected to the form of objects with specific material restrictions, then film may be a more appropriate expression of conveying a sense of the sublime; the medium being more formless and boundless.<sup>112</sup> There are definite arguments against this opinion; for instance sculpture does indeed deal with objects which have physical boundaries but can succeed in the expression of the sublime through the use of gigantic scale, repetition and physicality. In that way this medium starts to reflect nature and the environment. An extraordinary

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<sup>110</sup> Timothy Murray, "Digital Baroque: Via Viola or the Passage of Theatricality", *SubStance*, 2002, v31 n2&3, pp265-279

<sup>111</sup> Lisa Jaye Young, "The Elemental Sublime", *Performing Arts Journal*, Sept 1997, v19 n3 pp65-71

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

example presents itself in the sculpture of Indian-born British sculptor Anish Kapoor (born 1954) whose artistic practice I have admired for a long time. His work, in many instances, has a distinct sublime quality due to its sheer size and sensitivity which adds an enormous amount of weight to the sculptural statement. In 2009 *Tall Tree and the Eye* was erected in the courtyard of The Royal Academy of Arts in London. It consists of 76 shiny, stainless steel spheres and rises up 15 metres to match the height of the surrounding buildings. Despite its size, when viewed from below, it has a look of ephemeral weightlessness and fragility and reduces the importance of the viewer through its monumental size. Time and place are somehow suspended and altered. The empty spaces between the shapes and the infinite fractal images reflected in the surfaces are intriguing and seem to blur the physical boundaries of this sculpture.<sup>113</sup>

Fig. 15  
Anish Kapoor, *Tall Tree and the Eye* (2009)  
Mirrored steel

Image available at: <http://artsintherightplace.wordpress.com/2009/10/04/anish-kapoor-vauxhall-bus-station/>

This artist's work will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.4.

Over the years, many different views on the sublime have emerged. My focus on Longinus, Kant and Burke, illustrated by the works of Hirst, Viola and Kapoor, also strongly influences the aesthetic strategies supporting my exhibition.

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<sup>113</sup> Tall Tree and the Eye  
[http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es/microsites/anish\\_kapoor/secciones/galeria\\_imagenes/galeria\\_imagenes\\_detalle.php?idio=ma=en&id\\_imagen=29](http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es/microsites/anish_kapoor/secciones/galeria_imagenes/galeria_imagenes_detalle.php?idio=ma=en&id_imagen=29) [accessed on 06/04/12]

However the added implication of weight, also underpinning my work, needs further elaboration. In the following chapter I will discuss several artists whose works have dealt with issues of weight in a search for lightness.



## 6. WEIGHT

*...the search for lightness is a reaction to the weight of living.*

*Italo Calvino*

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Traditionally, sculpture has concerned itself with a solid object or body that implicates certain weight, however fragmentary or delicate. It generally stays fixed and we, the spectators, move around it.<sup>114</sup> So is it possible to take the weight out of sculpture without diminishing its impact and characteristics? The challenge for me is to bring a sense of lightness to the heaviest of art forms without resorting to works that are either small in size or idea. Playing around with expectations of heaviness poses questions in the mind of the spectator and can result in unexpected outcomes in the personal experience of the work. Apart from manipulating weight in a literal sense I will also attempt to make comments on lightness through a more conceptual approach involving phenomenological contemplation, where the spectator will be part of the work and experience a sense of the sublime.

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<sup>114</sup> Gabriel Orozco (afterword by Ann Temkin): *Photogravity*, Published Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art; New York, c1999, p189

The following artists have all influenced me in the way they have commented through their work on weight(lessness), phenomenology, contemplation about existence and the sublime.

## 6.1 Lee Ufan

The work of South Korean artist Lee Ufan (born 1936) explores the relationship between materials in a way that encourages contemplation of the materiality of the components. Living in Japan since 1956, he studied philosophy in Tokyo and his interest in this field is evident in the exceptionally meditative and concentrated nature of his paintings and sculptures. His studies focused on Nietzsche and Rilke as well as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, whose philosophies inform the basis of his art. Considered part of the *Mono-ha* group, his sculptural work explores emptiness and the void. *Mono-ha* refers to a group of artists practicing in Japan in the late sixties and early seventies who used both natural and man-made materials in their work. It was their aim to bring objects together, as far as possible in unaltered condition, allowing the juxtaposed materials to speak for themselves. By rearranging objects into artworks rather than creating these objects, they set up a visual conversation between the separate elements. The aim was to draw attention to the interdependent relationships between the objects and the space surrounding them and to challenge pre-existing experiences of such materials so the viewer could relate to them on a new level.<sup>115</sup> Ufan examines the connection between

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<sup>115</sup> Joan Kee, "Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan", *Oxford Art Journal*, 2008, v31 n 3, pp405-424

objects that encounter the external world and the space that embraces them. He has explored “the art of emptiness” through contemplative, thought provoking simplicity. He investigates emptiness and the void through sculptural work consisting of untreated materials like stone and iron and his compositions are generally silent yet suggestive. The works manipulate the space they inhabit and condition the viewer’s perception. He expresses a preoccupation with the relationship between interior and exterior, painted and unpainted, made and unmade.<sup>116</sup>

Fig. 16

Lee Ufan, *Relatum – Residence* (1988)

Stone plates, iron plates

Image available at: <http://www.venice-exhibitions.org/index.php?page=58&lang=jp&item=39&n=1>

Fig. 17

Lee Ufan, *Relatum – Discussion* (2003)

Stones, iron plates

Image available at: <http://www.gg-art.com/news/photoshow/798011.html>

The juxtaposition of the materials he uses in his work instigated contemplation on how I could achieve a dialogue between the elements used in my own sculpture. The use of fragile, orange sticks combined with heavy stones and boulders seems to exude a connection between the materials that extends beyond the concept. Not only is the heaviness/lightness exaggerated, but the work also speaks to the viewer through the materiality of the elements.

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<sup>116</sup> Joan Kee, “Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan”, *Oxford Art Journal*, 2008, v31 n 3, pp405-424

## 6.2 Cornelia Parker

A certain amount of lightness is also present in the installation work of Cornelia Parker (born 1956). She is intrigued by how everyday objects can be transformed almost beyond recognition by (often violent) processes. At first glance her interest may seem directed towards her tendency to destroying objects, but in fact she is fascinated by how the change that is brought about can create something entirely new. She tries to capture objects and events in the moment before they disappear beyond human perception. Her work is regarded internationally for its complex, ironic style<sup>117</sup> and is highly allusive and patterned.<sup>118</sup> Many of her works interrupt processes and alter states. She is interested in deconstructing things, undoing and rearranging them and then placing them, in a mutated condition, in the gallery.

In *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991) the artist had the British Army help her explode an old, ramshackle garden shed. The resulting torn-apart fragments were collected and later suspended on thin wire in the middle of a room at the Tate Modern Gallery. They were hanging around a single light source which caused the shattered sections to cast large shadows on the walls.<sup>119</sup>

Fig. 18

Cornelia Parker, *Cold Dark Matter: an Exploded View* (1991)  
Exploded garden shed, wire

Image available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/parker-cold-dark-matter-an-exploded-view-t06949>

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<sup>117</sup> She was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1997

<sup>118</sup> Cornelia Parker – Biography

<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/cornelia-parker/biography/> [accessed on 23/06/11]

<sup>119</sup> Foreword by Jonathan Watkins, *Cornelia Parker: Never Endings*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, Sept-Nov 2007, p 12

The work is formalising the fragments of a destructive event and can be viewed as some kind of resurrection. The striking style of her suspended sculpture, challenging the limitations of weight, time and space, is typical of a lot of Parker's work.<sup>120</sup> She succeeds in combining diverse elements of process, performance, installation and narrative. Her sculptures consisting of suspended rocks and bricks are vaguely reminiscent of Australian sculptor Ken Unsworth's (born 1931) suspended stone sculptures. Unsworth is admired both for his formalist sculpture and rigorous logic of propped up or suspended stones, the expressionism of his paintings and the dramatic symbolism of his kinetic installations. Some of Unsworth's early body art pieces show his body suspended as if it floats between consciousness and unconsciousness, the material world and the immaterial. These works are about equilibrium and formal relations as well as violent experiences and his sculptures often continue this theme. *Suspended stone circle II* (1988) is one of his levitation works where heavy river stones are held in place by wires secured to the ceiling. The stones' centre of gravity falls exactly on the central axis of the circle and each stone is equidistant to the next. Three sets of suspension wires create three cones, suggesting the actual established force field.<sup>121</sup>

Fig. 19  
Ken Unsworth, *Suspended Stone Wall Piece* (1976)  
River stones, wire  
Image available at: <http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=102234>

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<sup>120</sup> Foreword by Jonathan Watkins, *Cornelia Parker: Never Endings*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, Sept-Nov 2007, pp12-15

<sup>121</sup> Collection, Ken Unsworth  
<http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/work/356.1988.a-yyyy/> [accessed 19/05/12]

Fig. 20  
Ken Unsworth, *Suspended Stone Circle II* (1988)  
River stones, wire  
Image available at:

<http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/356.1988.a-yyyy/>

Although her suspension pieces are vaguely reminiscent of Unsworth's suspended stones, Parker has instilled a far greater sense of lightness and movement in her work.

Fig. 21  
Cornelia Parker, *Neither From Nor Towards* (1992)  
Weathered brick, wires

Image available at: <http://www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk/showWork.do?id=597>

Fig. 22  
Cornelia Parker, *Edge of England* (1999)  
Chalk, wires

Image available at: <http://arliquido.blogs.sapo.pt/arquivo/445378.html>

As intended, my own suspended rock has a much heavier and more threatening presence. The lightness in this work concerns itself with “lightness of being” and feelings of human insignificance. I aim for the viewer to feel threatened and experience sensations of insignificance through the work, rather than to make the work actually lightweight.

### **6.3 Antony Gormley**

Antony Gormley (born 1950) has worked with lightness and materiality associated with the human body for decades. He has since the early 1980s used

casts of his own body to communicate notions of being and existence because, according to the artist, “the personal body is the place where emotions are most directly registered”.<sup>122</sup> His work *Domain Field* (2003) is one example where he successfully manages to incorporate weightlessness or nothingness into his figurative sculpture. This was the first time he did not use only his own body for the moulds but tried to embrace collective human life as raw material. Gormley created human forms by inserting small lengths of stainless steel into figure moulds of a large number of people. The human forms that this work consists of seem to inhabit space but at the same time are made of space. The welded steel evidently has weight which roots the sculptures to the ground, yet each form is empty – each implies a representation of a body. The forms exude a certain lightness of being, not so much a bodily presence but rather a trace of it.<sup>123</sup> The sculptures interact with the viewer who becomes part of the work as soon as they enter the field of figures. The usual condition of viewing a work of art is inverted: we as the spectator are not so much looking at the figures as they are looking back at us.<sup>124</sup>

Fig. 23  
Antony Gormley, *Domain Field* (2003)  
Stainless steel bar  
Image available at:

[http://archive.balticmill.com/showmediaframe\\_nl.php?file=L25184.jpg](http://archive.balticmill.com/showmediaframe_nl.php?file=L25184.jpg)

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<sup>122</sup> Antony Gormley, Quotes

<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/antony-gormley/quotes/> [accessed on 16/06/11]

<sup>123</sup> Isabel King (ed.), *Making Space*, Hand Books, BALTIC, Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, 2004, pp142,143

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, p60

Gormley states:

Making sculpture stems from a need to leave a trace of existence, but there is an even greater need to challenge existence itself with mute objects that look back at us and question our materiality with their own.<sup>125</sup>

Here the artist poses challenging existential questions of what the importance or purpose of being actually is. Is it sufficient for individuals to make a considerable impact by simply possessing a material presence or is our existence more substantial than that? For us, in order to be a significant entity, is it essential to be conscious of the fact that we exist or that we leave behind a tangible legacy or trace after we leave this earth?

One of the most well-known pieces of contemporary public art is Gormley's *The Angel of the North* (1998).

Fig. 24  
Antony Gormley, *Angel of the North* (1998)  
Steel

Image available at: <http://www.docbrown.info/docspics/northeast/nutpage23.htm>

Near Gateshead in the U.K. it dominates the skyline rising 20 metres from the ground with a wingspan of 54 metres. An enlarged cast from his own body, it was designed to mark a place (a local symbol of coal miner's toil) and to "bridge the earth and sky through a body". Gormley called his angel "dark" because it was made out of iron which was dug out of the closed body of the earth. The concentrated material has rusted and as such carries the colour of blood.<sup>126</sup> This sculpture's massive size dwarfs all that come to visit and in its commanding and

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<sup>125</sup> Michael Mack (ed.), *Antony Gormley*, Steidl/MACK Germany, 2007, p9

<sup>126</sup> Lucina Ward, "Angel of the North", *Artonview*, Spring 2011, pp20-21



sublime presence it leaves people feeling insignificant, overwhelmed and awestruck.

Another more abstract work by Gormley titled *Body and Fruit* (1991–1993) has inspired me to continue my exploration of weight and substance of the human condition and existence, even though his concept was quite dissimilar to mine.

Fig. 25  
Antony Gormley, *Body and Fruit* (1991-1993)  
Cast iron, steel cable

Image available at: <http://minimalexposition.blogspot.com.au/2011/08/antony-gormley-expansion-works-1989.html>

Whereas his thoughts were occupied by the obsession with renegotiating the skin<sup>127</sup>, this work speaks to me through its obvious weight and the suspension. The sheer weight of the two elements in this sculpture (6 tons and 1.5 tons) and the manner in which they are suspended – how they operate in space and interact with the viewer – impose certain fragility upon their audience. In the presence of these massive sculptures we may start questioning our significance as living, breathing beings, something I too try to achieve, especially with my suspended rock.

## 6.4 Anish Kapoor

Anish Kapoor also works extensively with heavy rock elements and has been a major influence on my work over the last few years. Kapoor (born 1954) has lived

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<sup>127</sup>Kunsthhaus Bregenz, Antony Gormley, July 12 - October 4, 2009  
<http://www.e-flux.com/shows/view/7015> [accessed on 04/04/10]

and worked in London since the early 1970s where he moved to study art. He has been called “contemporary art’s major exponent of artistic nothingness”.<sup>128</sup>

To create sculptural nothingness is quite a radical concept. Sculpture by nature is usually preoccupied with the opposite notions of nothingness: mass, form, volume and weight. Kapoor does in fact often use some very traditional materials, like big blocks of limestone or sandstone, but he does not strive to express weight and mass in his work; he rather attempts to cancel those factors out and by doing so dematerialise the apparent solidity.<sup>129</sup>

This artist’s work can evoke subconscious heights and often suggests a sense of the sublime as is evident in one of his recent works *Untitled* (2009) installed on Alan Gibbs’ Farm on New Zealand’s north island. Composed of an enormous red PVC membrane stretched between two giant mild steel ellipses, it has a quality “rather like a flayed skin”, in Kapoor’s own words. Its immense size (west end: 25 metres x 8 metres, east end: 8 metres x 25 metres) contributes greatly to the overall effect.<sup>130</sup>

Fig. 26

Anish Kapoor, *Untitled* (2009)  
PVC membrane, metal rings

Image available at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/executive-living/alan-gibbs-landmark-decisions/story-e6frg9zo-1225793569299>

An earlier version of this sculpture was erected in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London in 2002 as a site-specific commission. Titled *Marsyas* (a satyr

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<sup>128</sup> Martin Gayford, “Artistic nothingness”, *The Spectator*, May 1998, p1

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, p2

<sup>130</sup> The Farm: Alan Gibbs – businessman, collector and artists’ accomplice  
<http://www.robgarrettcfa.com/thefarm.htm> [accessed on 25/02/2012]

in Greek mythology, flayed alive by the god Apollo) it immerses the viewer in a monochromatic field of colour. Three giant steel rings are joined together by a single length of PVC membrane. Two vertical rings at each end of the space and a third suspended parallel with the bridge, it confuses spatial perception. It almost seems wedged into place; the sculpture's general form shifts from vertical to horizontal and back to vertical again. Maybe illogically, Kapoor tried to challenge the intimidating height of the Turbine Hall by using its length. To view the whole piece from the one position is impossible. Instead, the spectator experiences it as a succession of separate encounters, which are then added up in the mind to construct the whole.<sup>131</sup> The constriction of the space – established through its massive size and the tight fit – gives this outstanding sculpture an imposing appeal.

Fig. 27

Anish Kapoor, *Marsyas* (2002)  
PVC membrane, metal rings

Image available at: <http://www.crdp.ac-versailles.fr/ressources-et-services/Monumenta-2011/Marsyas-Melancholia>

Kapoor's sculpture commonly draws from phenomenological thought. For instance: rough, hewn rocks, boulders and stones in their physical earthiness generate a feeling of infinity and the sublime in the various ways the artist has created voids in these structures.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> The Unilever series: Anish Kapoor  
<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/kapoor/default.htm> [accessed on 01/04/12]

<sup>132</sup> The Terror of The Void, Tony Bond  
<http://ojs-prod.library.usyd.edu.au/index.php/SSR/article/viewFile/215/195> [accessed 04/11/2012]

Fig. 28

Anish Kapoor, *Black Stones, Human Bones* (1993)

Marble

Image available at: <http://www.bassmuseum.org/event/art-public-opening-night/>

Fig. 29

Anish Kapoor, *Sho'ah Memorial* (1996)

Kilkenny limestone, pigment

Image available at: <http://www.6millionmemorials.co.uk/uk-holocaust-memorials/anish-kapoor-holocaust-memorial---ljr>

*Void Field* (1989) is a wonderful early example of work that generates these kinds of feelings. He created small voids in several large blocks of sandstone and used dark pigment to enhance the voids. According to the artist the work is about mass, weight and volume and at the same time seems to be weightless, volumeless and ephemeral. This installation explores metaphysical dualities (for instance light/darkness, earth/sky and mind/body).<sup>133</sup>

Fig. 30

Anish Kapoor, *Void Field* (1989)

Northumbrian sandstone, pigment

Image available at: <http://venicebiennale.britishcouncil.org/timeline/1990/image/7>

Space, for Kapoor, is not empty but full of meaning and potential. It is almost like he is trying to turn stone into sky; the dark void inside the stone can be regarded as the darkness of black night.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Germano Celant, *Anish Kapoor*, Fondazione Prada, Edizioni Charta, Milan, 1996, pp xxxi,

xxxii

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

After adding weightlessness to the inside of a regiment of heavy boulders, the following quote is an illustration of the artist's musings on applying this concept to the outside of these rocks:

Once I made Void Field... it occurred to me that it would be wonderful to attempt the opposite... In Void Field we have the earth containing the sky, earth outside, sky within. To do the opposite was to have earth within, sky without. I just painted some stones... And... they became bits of sky. They became weightless...<sup>135</sup>

In other words Kapoor is attempting to reverse the effect of infinity that he managed to convey in the rocks in *Void Field*.

In part of my own work there is an attempt to pull this notion of weightlessness or nothingness into the realm of phenomenological experience. Hence the use of rocks that seem to exist in the way they are perceived; heavy, grounded and earthy. The way they are displayed or photographed poses many questions for the viewer about the notion of weight: the rocks look too heavy to be carried, too heavy for the little twigs and branches that support them and they should not be able to be suspended in mid-air. Only closer examination reveals a different truth; these rocks are not always real, some are very light, made of almost weightless materials.

Kapoor's series of "Voids" are followed by works with highly polished, reflective surfaces. These sculptures pull the spectator out of gravity almost effortlessly through the use of mirror-like exteriors. The illusion of weightlessness is conjured up quite successfully in the following examples.

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<sup>135</sup> Germano Celant, *Anish Kapoor*, Fondazione Prada, Edizioni Charta, Milan, 1996, p xxxi

In *Turning the world upside down III*, a 6-foot-tall deformed globe constructed out of polished stainless steel produces an inverted reflection of the world. The artist pulls the viewer out of normal gravity by using the concavity of the gaping depression in this sphere which turns the reflection of the viewer upside down in its rippled surface.<sup>136</sup>

Fig. 31  
Anish Kapoor, *Turning the world upside down III* (1996)  
Mirrored steel  
Image available at: <http://www.db-artmag.com/archiv/2005/e/3/1/330.html>

Opposites try to merge together without challenging each other. They perform the unexpected changes of a confrontational existence in which the sublime and the everyday coexist; fullness is reflected in emptiness and the real exists in harmony with the abstract.<sup>137</sup>

In *Turning the World Inside Out*, the tunnelled indentation on top of the orb almost looks like a vast wormhole. It ends in dull opacity while the viewer obtains a double reflection along the way – once on its rim but also on the sculpture's outer face.<sup>138</sup> It draws together its surroundings into itself, including the viewer's own gaze and body. While the interior is void, the exterior expresses and restrains a panoramic image of the space and the everyday life around it.

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<sup>136</sup> Nancy Princenthal, "Anish Kapoor at Barbara Gladstone", *Art in America*, July 1998, v86 n7, pp189-190

<sup>137</sup> Germano Celant, *Anish Kapoor*, Fondazione Prada, Edizioni Charta, Milan, 1996 p xxxvi

<sup>138</sup> Nancy Princenthal, "Anish Kapoor at Barbara Gladstone", *Art in America*, July 1998, v86 n7, pp189-190

Fig. 32

Anish Kapoor, *Turning the world inside out* (1995)

Mirrored steel

Image available at: <http://www.artfund.org/what-we-do/art-weve-helped-buy/artwork/6964/turning-the-world-inside-out>

The work is perpetually divided between interior and exterior, between hiding and reflecting, between movement and immobility.<sup>139</sup>

The most famous culmination of these polished steel forms is *Cloud Gate* (2004) which was erected on the promenade at Chicago's Millennium Park. Also colloquially known as “the Bean” it measures 25x15x12 m. and its polished stainless steel surface draws in the surrounding buildings and 80% of the sky which is why Kapoor called it *Cloud Gate*. Balancing on both ends it is elegant in its simplicity and its massive size gives it weight and importance.<sup>140</sup>

Fig. 33

Anish Kapoor, *Cloud Gate* (2004)

Mirrored steel

Image available at: <http://uk.phaidon.com/agenda/art/picture-galleries/2010/march/24/the-key-works-of-anish-kapoor/?idx=9>

These examples show the many and varied ways in which artists have attempted to convey notions of lightness and weight. From using actual heavy materials that

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<sup>139</sup> Germano Celant, *Anish Kapoor*, Fondazione Prada, Edizioni Charta, Milan, 1996 p xxxvi

<sup>140</sup> Chicago Architecture Info, Cloud Gate

<http://www.chicagoarchitecture.info/Building/636/Cloud-Gate.php> [ accessed on 23/03/12]

seem to float, to gigantic scale mirrored sculpture that seems to disappear into the surroundings; there are infinite ways to deal with the subject. My interpretation of this theme is expressed in the MPhil exhibition which shows an objectification of all the philosophical considerations that have emerged during my candidature. On entering the space, one of the first pieces noticed is a large, faux boulder, suspended by thin, orange rope<sup>141</sup> above a chair in the centre of the gallery. The rope seems too thin to securely hold the seemingly very heavy rock afloat. The aim is to fill the viewer with trepidation for fear of getting crushed when taking a seat on that chair. This feeling of fragility and the terror that it produces ties in with the sublime elements connected to the lightness of being. Another sculpture of a large rock protrudes from the wall and is held up by a thin stick. It is presented to look too heavy for the tiny support and raises the question of how this fragile twig is capable of supporting a large boulder; in our experience this should not be possible. This piece reflects my interest in the phenomenological premise that our individual reality consists of objects as they are understood in our own, personal consciousness and aims to make the viewer reflect on their expectation of appearances of the things that surround them. There are also some smaller sculptures of twigs supporting rocks in various ways, both free standing and as wall pieces. These too refer back to the phenomenological element of the research. Another wall piece shows a row of rocks and twigs on a shelf, not only articulating the duality of lightness and weight, but also referring to Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence. Two smaller sculptures consisting of several orange sticks support seemingly floating rocks. I have also included some maquettes of ideas for larger works. The rest of the exhibition consists of photographic work.

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<sup>141</sup> Orange is used again to reference my Dutch heritage



One enormous photograph of a rock face and twig on the far wall of the gallery is extremely large (approximately 3x4m) and aims to leave the viewer overwhelmed and to impart feelings of the sublime. To deal with the theory of eternal recurrence I use a large amount of repetitive, small photographs (15x15cm). They will be displayed in a long row on the wall. There is also a digital photographic presentation on a computer screen that is shown on a loop, showing the images over and over again so they seem to be recurring “eternally”.

## 7. CONCLUSION

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In the years just prior to the commencement of my postgraduate studies much of my work has related to migration, presence, absence and identity, which, it is fair to say, most migrant artists feel the need to address at some stage in their career. Because this territory has already been extensively covered by myself and others, I decided against adding to this discourse. Choosing not to take this familiar and much-travelled path carried not only an element of risk but also brought about the realisation, beautifully expressed by David Foster Wallace, “[t]hat our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home”<sup>142</sup>. So instead of dealing directly with issues of migration and bodily absence there has been a shift towards considering the relevance of existence on a more fundamental and immediate personal level, not just in one place or another but more so in an existential sense. As mentioned in this paper’s Preface, this shift in artistic direction occurred in the early days of my postgraduate studies, following the life-threatening experiences of two close friends which brought home to me a deep and lasting sense of mortality. The fallout from those experiences was so all-encompassing that it was impossible for me not to contend with existential issues in my research.

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<sup>142</sup> Wallace, David Foster, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2007, pp64-65

The recent progress of my sculptural practice from a mainly figurative and rather literal way of working into an increasingly philosophical and conceptual approach was discussed in chapter one. Milan Kundera's book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) has been a key influence in this process. Apart from using conventional sculptural methods to convey notions of phenomenology and the sublime, the photographic documentation of my work in the field has not only introduced me to another medium, it has also assisted me in overcoming the barriers that had up till then restricted me in working on a truly massive scale.

Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence was explored in chapter two. His thoughts on the fact that in life recurrence would be necessary to (theoretically) add "weight" to our existence, whether conceivable or not, are open to discussion. I argued the opposite, where eternally repeated acts become less, rather than more, significant. My exhibition includes the repetition of elements which echoes reflections on recurrence and its impact. (e.g. a digital PowerPoint presentation on a continuous loop).

In chapter three I examined the definition of "existence" and "being" by considering both philosophical and scientific theories. I studied the scientific development in magnification and how this has expanded our view of the universe. As a result of this progress our indiscriminating preoccupation with the merely visual has been questioned. A division was created between simply pleasurable *watching* and a much more rational *observing*. What emerged was an expanded awareness of the things that surround us, how they appear to us and what meaning they have to us.

This expanded awareness took us into chapter four, which elucidated the term phenomenology. It investigated how phenomenological concerns have been incorporated into my exhibition and how I challenged personal reality. This reality is used to objectify the world that surrounds us in order to make sense of it. Sometimes this objectification is hard to achieve, especially when subjected to the imagination. I discussed artists who have shown that art can challenge us in this objectification and take us to where we cannot make total sense of what is presented, something I too have attempted to achieve in my work.

Chapter five described how aesthetic strategies evoking the sublime can aid in creating or overcoming feelings of fear and human insignificance. I investigated the historical evolution of the “rhetorical” sublime into the “natural” sublime. Elements of these theories have converged to form the contemporary sublime and examples were given by contemporary artists. In my work the photography offers the traditional man versus nature sense of insignificance but I also have been able to literally represent a massive rock face supported by a tiny stick. Likewise, the sculpture of the rock suspended above the chair evokes feelings of threat and fear of impending death.

In Chapter six the ideas of weight in both a literal and conceptual sense were explored by a more in-depth look at four different artists whose work have influenced my studio practice: Ufan, Parker, Gormley and Kapoor.

As human beings we all yearn for meaning and significance in our lives and this yearning assumes endless expression. However, the eternal existential angst

remains. We are mortal beings; consciousness attached to a dying body. In researching the premise of existence carrying “weight” in the sense of significance or importance, I have provided more questions than answers. From a personal point of view, I strongly believe that artistic expression has and always will be our most effective human endeavour in providing form to our primal yearning for meaning, to that angst innate to anybody questioning their existence.

This MPhil research has been rewarding in many respects. Fundamentally, it has facilitated a trajectory from the rather stifling confines of conservative figuration towards a more conceptual approach to my studio practice. In particular, the use of photography, a relatively new medium for me, has been instrumental in this conversion. Most importantly, my research has provided me with a greater understanding of the philosophical threads that tie my work together, especially those relating to phenomenology and the sublime. This has enabled me to find an effective way of expressing the increasing significance of those powerful feelings of mortality and transience that so overwhelmed me early in my candidature. In so doing, this study does not end here, but provides a creative path ahead.

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