

TYLER MELLINS:
GHOSTS IN
THE MACHINE

Ghosts in the Machine is an immersive installation featuring three new video works. It uses the supernatural to create discourse about power, control, technology, death and identity.

The work was devised in response to arebyte's current artistic programme: *The Body, The Mind, The Soul*.

Visitors will explore an abandoned storage facility by torchlight, encountering ghostly apparitions in each of the installation's three zones. In part a speculative fiction, the work imagines a vaguely apocalyptic future (enabled by artificial intelligence and surveillance capitalism) in which our digital ghosts are all that remain.

The ghosts that haunt this work are born from dislocated fragments of our online identities, raising questions around what might happen to our digital footprints after we die. What separates us from our data profiles, especially once we no longer exist? What separates the Metaverse from the Afterlife?



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Tyler Mellins (b. 1995, Mansfield, UK) works primarily with moving image and installations, though his practice frequently includes elements of writing, sculpture and performance.

Mellins creates eerie experiences and opportunities to reflect on our changing relationships with information and technology in a post-truth era. His work often takes aesthetic cues from the supernatural, informed by his experience working closely with a team of paranormal investigators.

"Mellins, whose interest in magick and the occult informs his work, creates opportunities for audiences to test their belief through engagement and perseverance."

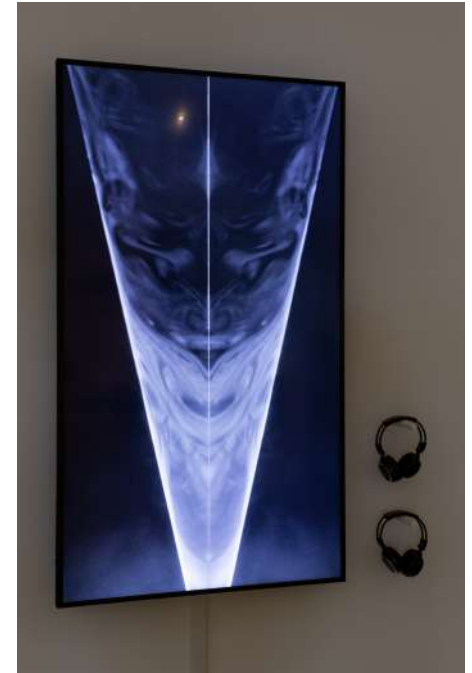
- **Salena Barry**, *Encounters* (2023)

While not concerned with proving or disproving the existence of life after death, he aims for his work to reveal something to viewers about themselves or the world we live in. The encounters he creates challenge us to think critically about the information and images that appear on our screens, and to question the intentions of those on the other side.

Mellins trained in filmmaking and media production before completing a Fine Art MFA in 2019. He is currently based at Yorkshire Artspace in Sheffield.

Left: *Receiver* (2023), Right: *Breakthrough* (2022)

As shown in group show *Dark Echoes* at Site Gallery. Photos by Jules Lister.



"With a considered and complex approach to the uncanny, Tyler's nuanced practice delves into the unknown. He approaches everything he does with professionalism, dedication and real strength of practice. He is hugely deserving of a wider audience for his deeply affecting work."

- **Angelica Sule** (Director, Film & Video Umbrella)

"Tyler Mellins is one of my favourite young artists[...] His work has this wonderful sense of supernatural stagecraft that's just as aligned to the cinematic theories of Tom Gunning as it is the works of contemporary theorists of the supernatural, such as Victoria Nelson and Jeffrey J. Kripal."

- **Jamie Sutcliffe** (Co-Director, Strange Attractor Press)

U.X.

SETTING THE SCENE

Upon entering the gallery, you're provided with a torch. You use the torch to navigate the space, which is almost entirely dark. Occasionally, the darkness is broken by bright spotlights from above, which seem to scan the room as though looking for intruders or escapees.

The sounds are atmospheric and industrial; sudden metallic clangs that might startle you in the dark. You can hear faint voices; disconnected from one another, and overlapping. It sounds as though you're in some sort of warehouse. It looks that way too, with exposed metal air vents and ducting lining the ceilings revealed by your torchlight, as well as a large structure in the centre of the room.

There are three chambers in the structure, facing away from each other and converging in the centre. The structure is built from metal stage trusses and covered in fluted polycarbonate sheets; transparent enough for your torch to pass through and reveal the distorted silhouettes on the other side. Sometimes you also see someone else's torch shining back at you.

Continue to first encounter ►

APPARITION I: THE REFLECTION

The chamber facing you seems to be a storage facility filled with old mirrors leaning against the walls; some of which are visible while others are hidden beneath hessian dust sheets like paintings in a stately home. As you scan the room, you hear a voice. You notice a stirring on the largest mirror, as it seems that someone is shining a torch from within the mirror itself. They call out to you: *"is someone there?"*

You can't see the person, just the light from their torch. Soon, other lights and voices join the first, and you are somehow privy to their conversation.

"I could have sworn I saw someone..."

"Where?"

"There, in the mirror..."

"I saw it too,"

"There it is again! Did you see their torch?"

"Yes!"

"Do you think they're watching us?"

It appears you've been spotted. Eventually, the phantom search party disbands and the lights in the mirror disappear, leaving only the reflective surface behind.

Continue to next encounter ►

APPARITION II: THE MEMORY

A light comes on in a neighbouring space, visible to you through the transparent walls. You decide to investigate and find yourself in a similar chamber. This one contains a surveillance room, though it's fairly outdated. The light you saw is coming from several old CRT monitors lined up on industrial shelves, with a mass of tangled wires dropping to the floor. Routers flicker with green and red lights, sending and receiving signals. There are large cardboard boxes on the floor, a few of which are torn open, revealing they are full of old VHS tapes, each labelled with a person's name.

On the screens, channels flick between various livestreams. These range from the innocuous (such as footage of suburban driveways captured by Ring doorbells) to the more insidious (strangers browsing the internet, seemingly unaware that they are being recorded by their webcams). Occasionally, the screens show people with torches; some are sneaking around alleys or shopping malls, but others are here in the gallery with you, captured in real time by security cameras dotted about.

Sometimes, a startling pop of static will interrupt a broadcast, briefly showing a close-up glimpse of an eye or torch.

After browsing the screens for some time, something else startles you: you see yourself exploring the gallery. The delayed footage shows your own movements from a few moments ago, giving a brief glimpse into the past. You stand for a moment watching your own ghost before moving on.

Continue to final encounter ►

APPARITION III: THE SIMULACRUM

The final chamber is filled with pallets, shipping crates, and cardboard boxes. It has metal shelving with discarded ephemera and e-waste; television monitors, computers, satellite dishes, circuitboards, cables. As you approach, a ghostly hologram suddenly appears.

The figure appears unstable, glitching and distorting wildly. It is trying to speak to you, but is struggling to break through a mess of static interference and electronic noise. Occasionally, it seems to stabilise for long enough to utter a few sentences.

Its voice is uncanny and less-than-human. It changes frequently; different voices merging and overlapping as though several people are trying to speak at once. Its features are minimal, but they seem to shift too; many entities jostling for the opportunity to be seen and heard. Sometimes, a wireframe skeleton appears over the ghostly silhouette, like the kind used for motion tracking.

It tells of a dystopian digital afterlife; one in which our personal data has been appropriated by artificial intelligence and given a life of its own.

These simulacra, convinced they are the ghosts of real living people, wander aimlessly in the Metaverse, living in fear of the watchful eyes of their creators. Eventually, the spirit warns you that you are being watched, urging you to leave while you can; then abruptly disappears, leaving you in the dark.

End.

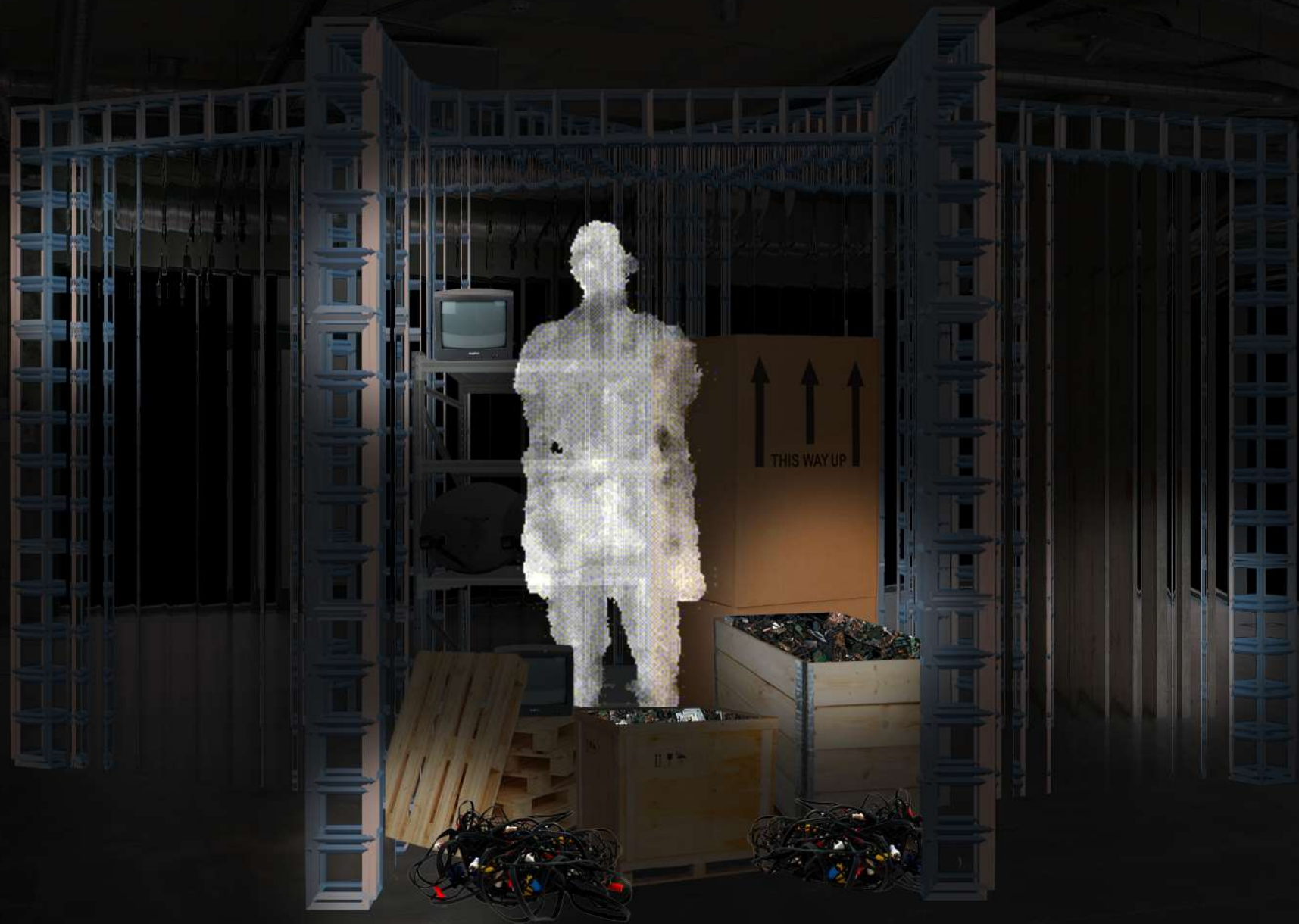
THE REFLECTION



THE MEMORY



THE SIMULACRUM



THE PANOPTICON

The central structure is constructed from steel trusses and polycarbonate sheets.

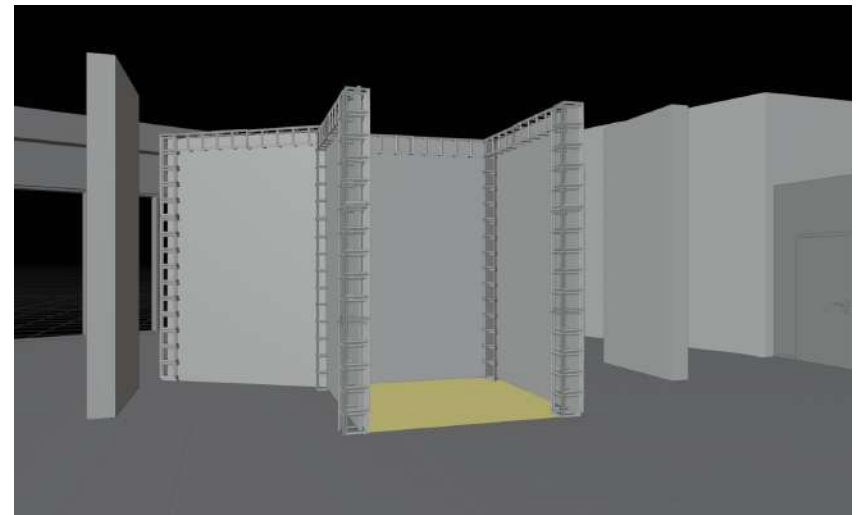
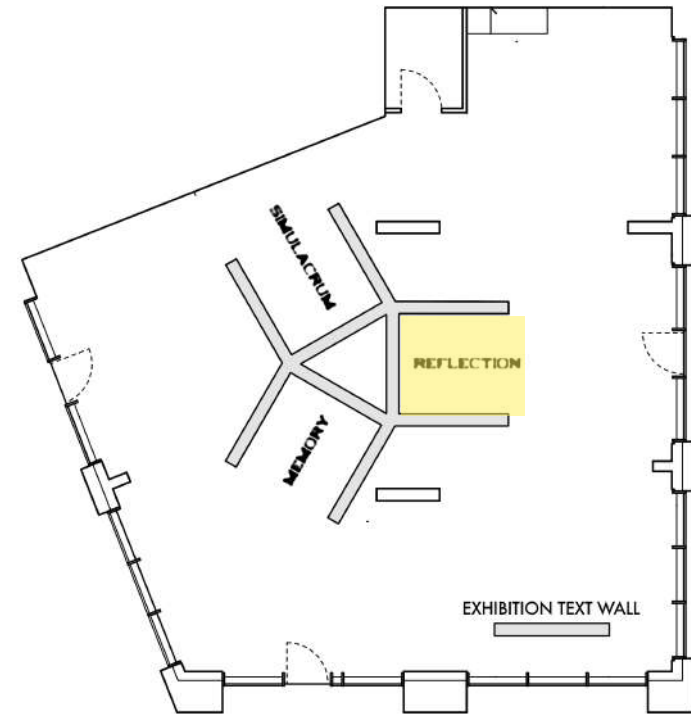
It draws inspiration from the *panopticon*, an architectural concept designed by **Jeremy Bentham** in the late 18th Century. Far predating (and perhaps setting the blueprint for) modern surveillance technology, the *panopticon* allowed all prisoners of an institution to be observed by a single concealed watchman. Unable to know for sure where the watchman was looking, prisoners would be compelled to behave as though they were always being watched.

In this installation, the structure is inverted; the disempowered visitor can only see into one chamber at a time. Throughout the experience, they become increasingly aware of invisible forces that may be watching them. To further this, searchlights occasionally scan the room (achieved using ceiling-mounted projectors).

The panopticon was never built, though many plans exist. It is itself a ghost: an example of *phantom architecture*. Drawing upon **Jacques Derrida's** notion of *hauntology*, the ghost of this building-that-never-was haunts our present in the form of a surveillance culture that now pervades our lives.

"He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication."

- **Michel Foucault**, writing on the panopticon in 1975



THE REFLECTION

The effect is achieved using a two-way mirror. Behind the mirror is a concealed flatscreen monitor; when the video plays, the light from the screen shines through and is visible on the surface of the mirror. The addition of an ornate wooden frame further helps to disguise the screen as a mirror.

For budget purposes, only a few mirrors will actually be visible. The other mirrors in the space will be pieces of wood covered in hessian sheets.

The video and soundtrack are triggered by a motion sensor which detects when a visitor has entered the chamber.

Two-way mirrors are perhaps best known for their use in interrogation rooms, allowing police to remain unseen while observing those being questioned. More recently, two-way mirrors are the subject of a moral panic propagated on TikTok. These videos claim to reveal instances of two-way mirrors being used in bathrooms, hotels and other public spaces for covert surveillance.

Mirrors - and in particular, black mirrors - are used in occult divination practices as a tool for scrying or communing with spirits. Today, *black mirror* is sometimes used to refer to the reflective surface of a phone or TV screen when turned off.

THE MEMORY

This work is automated; it begins once *The Reflection* ends.

Most of the footage in this section is pre-recorded, though it is presented as a livestream. It uses bespoke software developed for a previous work (*Receiver, 2023*) to randomly select and superimpose clips. This will create the glitching effect of the broadcast being interrupted by lights and eyes.

[Click here for a demo of Receiver](#)

Footage will include suburban driveways via Ring doorbells, CCTV images of urban areas, and covert webcam footage of people using computers

Some footage will be recorded for the project using infrared security cameras. Footage of Ring doorbell recordings will be sourced by open call; those who contribute will receive a credit in the exhibition publication and their name on one of the VHS tapes in the room.

Some elements will be live-streamed from cameras within the gallery. For ease and compatibility, these will be on separate screens to the pre-recorded content. These livestreams will operate on a time delay, enabled via vMix or Live Video Delay, so that visitors have the jarring experience of seeing themselves out of sync. Combined with the aesthetics of infrared night-vision cameras, this effect will simulate the experience of seeing a ghost.

THE SIMULACRUM

[Click here to view a video mock up](#)

The effect is achieved using an adaptation of the Victorian *Pepper's Ghost* technique, now famous for its use in bringing back dead celebrities to perform for modern audiences.

Wooden crates and pallets create a barrier which conceals the edge of a transparent acrylic sheet, positioned at a 45 degree angle from the floor to the back of the chamber. This captures the reflected image from a concealed flatscreen monitor on the floor, producing a ghostly hologram.

The ghostly figure is captured using a Kinect camera's depth sensor. It appears when a viewer approaches (triggered by a motion sensor) and continues to glitch in and out while reciting a monologue.

The script for this monologue is co-authored with artificial intelligence. It is designed to feel like a cutscene in a video game in which the viewer is a passive agent. The experience should not feel interactive; as in the *stone tape theory* of hauntings, this ghost is a *recording* of someone that was once alive.

There are hauntological elements to Kinect technology, which promised to revolutionise gaming but ultimately did not take off. The camera is now perhaps more popular amongst ghost hunters than gamers, owing to Kinect's habit of falsely detecting human figures in empty rooms.

EVENTS PROGRAMME

Please note these are suggestions only.

Curatorial Tour

A curatorial tour of the exhibition, led by arebyte curator Rebecca Edwards and followed by a Q&A with artist Tyler Mellins. IRL.

Panel Discussion: On Haunted Media

A panel discussion bringing together some of the leading contemporary voices on haunted media and digital death. Featuring Dr. Jeanine Griffin (Curator, *Invisible Dust*), Natalie Kane (Curator, V&A / *Haunted Machines*), Jamie Sutcliffe (Writer, *Strange Attractor Press*), Sarah Unwin (Producer, *The New Death*). IRL or online.

Absent Sitters with Mediale

Mediale present a VR performance of Gazelle Twin's digital seance, *Absent Sitters*, followed by a workshop designed to make the themes of this exhibition more accessible. IRL.

[Click here for a project timeline.](#)

[Click here for a list of further reading.](#)