

DadSonImage

TAPPING THE PULSE: PHILIP DADSON WORKS 1971–2004

The Film Archive Mediaplex
February 25 – March 24 Geography
March 30 – April 17 Body
April 20 – May 5 Sonics
BY LAWRENCE MCDONALD

Images courtesy of Philip Dadson

"I like concepts. I like work to have a conceptual base." – Philip Dadson¹

The first half of 2005 was a fruitful period for Wellington-based admirers of the work of Philip Dadson. From 28 February until 12 March, the Bowen Galleries showed "Selected Work/Digital Prints and Drawings (Polar Projects)", a dealer gallery show bearing some relation to the touring exhibition *Philip Dadson Polar Projects*. Currently at Porirua's Pataka Museum of Arts and Cultures, one of these Polar Projects, the video work *Flutter*, forms part of the *Flagworks* exhibition (28 May – 11 September). However, the largest concentration of works by Dadson could be found at The Film Archive's Pelorus Trust mediagallery and other parts of the Archive's mediaplex from 25 February to 5 May. *Tapping the Pulse: Philip Dadson Works 1971 – 2004*, curated by Mark Williams with an accompanying "occasional paper" by Christina Barton, was divided into three parts with the titles: *Geography*, *Body*, and *Sonics*. In bringing together examples of Dadson's moving image work from the last 33 years, it constituted something of a partial retrospective of an artist whose work, by nature and design, falls between artistic categories and disciplines.

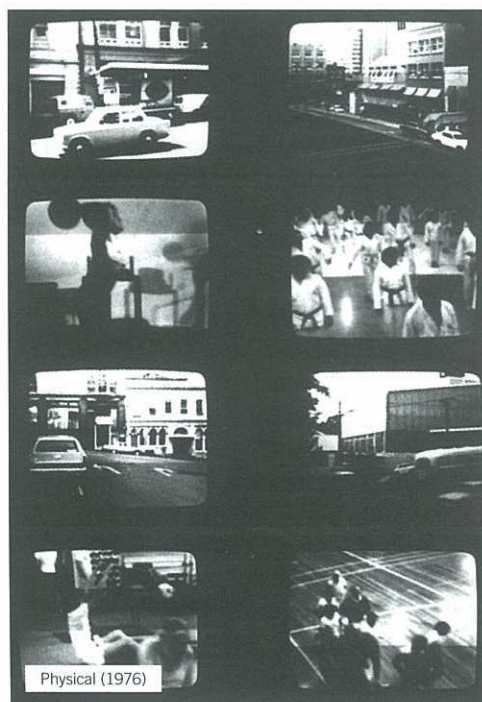
Tapping the Pulse utilised practically all of The mediaplex's available and workable

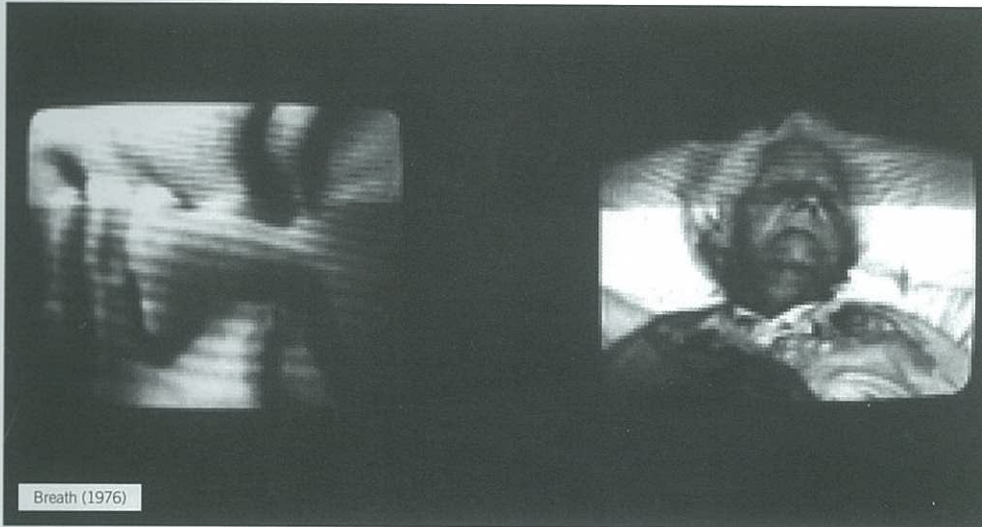
exhibition space to accommodate the wide variety of works in its three parts. The three large "Drawings from Groundplans/Soundtracks" (1986–7) were placed on the wall above the Archive's bar and reception counter, remaining in place throughout the exhibition's duration, and made for pertinent comparisons with the recent "Rock Records" (2004) series further up the road at Bowen Galleries. The dedicated exhibition space itself was used sparingly for single, but large-scale works: the triple screen *Chthonian Pulse (Geography)*; the centrally placed installation *Ho (Conundrum Quartet)*, which formed part of *Body*; and a full wall projection of the video-performance piece *Triad 1*. Other works were mounted in the main public lounge area, including the window facing the corner of Taranaki and Ghuznee Streets, which ensured that those waiting to cross either street at the lights were exposed to such appropriate works as *Footstep Hocket* and *Uncharted Crossings*. Still others (*Flutter*; *Mangrove*; and *Ha*) were located on the exterior of the Archive building's

Taranaki Street side, and, particularly in the case of the skull-image video *Ha*, were best viewed after dark.

A significant moment in the launching of Dadson's career as a video and performance artist was the 1976 Auckland City Art Gallery exhibition "Video plus Performance". Two works from that exhibition, *Physical* and *Breath*, were programmed into the *Body* part of *Tapping the Pulse*. *Physical*, a four channel work – carefully restored in 1999 for inclusion in The Archive's Film Centre exhibition *PALeo Neo Video*², in which it was exhibited in a large display cabinet near Evolution Gym – was here installed vertically rather than horizontally in two four-monitor towers, thereby delivering a double portion of each source tape. Dadson's interest, of course, is in orchestrating four variations on the sounds, rhythms, and repetitions of the human body in motion, by juxtaposing footage from four different health and fitness locations. The strong and simple conceptual base of *Physical*, a hallmark of all Dadson's work, is made manifest in the elegant symmetry of its formal structure, so that watching it is akin to a listening to a piece of music by From Scratch or Steve Reich. With the passage of time, the work can also be seen to have taken on something of a socio-historical dimension. Its soft black and white images come from a less self-conscious period just prior to the rise of body culture, a culture wherein people are exhorted to "become some body". The figures in Dadson's video, by contrast, appear just to work out rather than work on themselves.

Physical is a work that pays dividends to viewers regardless of whether or not they follow the course of its full 50 minutes running time. It has something of an ambient quality and can be entered at almost any point without encountering difficulties. Thus its installation in what is essentially a media cafe space did not compromise the conditions of reception for the work. Like the figures in motion on its screens, *Physical's* four parallel scenarios unfold like a piece of music in perpetual motion, seemingly





Breath (1976)

without beginning or end.

In contrast, *Breath*, another work made in the same period, would not have sustained the prolonged scrutiny necessary to it, had it been placed in the wide, open plan, daylight infused space of the media cafe. Unlike *Physical*, it is a work which demands, indeed compels, that you watch it from the beginning to the end of its 20 minute duration. A small, dark, and intimate space with room for few viewers is the most suitable viewing situation for *Breath*. Fortuitously, halfway between the media cafe and the dedicated gallery space, there is a small, enclosed viewing space that is normally used to show film or television compilation programmes. It made for a very suitable venue in which to revisit this simple and powerful process-based work, which juxtaposes “primal” and “final” scenes: on the one hand an unfolding scene of the labours of birth, culminating in the first breath, a moment that inaugurates each individual human being’s autonomous existence; and on the other, the laboured breathing of a sleeping, elderly woman who, we can presume, is moving inexorably towards her last moments and her last breath on Earth.

Although only 20 minutes in length, viewing this work in a small, darkened room – without

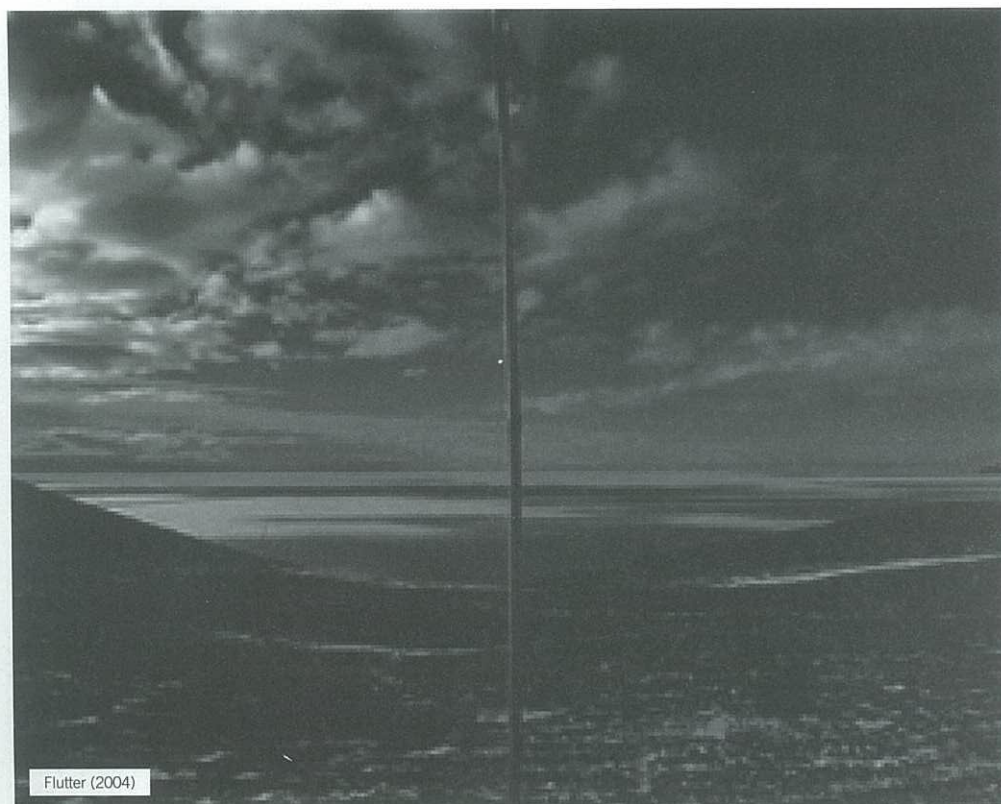
windows and, except for a narrow entrance, virtually enclosed – seemed to elongate time as the viewer was immersed within the telos of *Breath*’s processual logic; achieved in the case of the left monitor’s “narrative” closure (Mrs Dick’s delivery), but only implied in the case of the right (Mrs Rogers suspension in a protracted “moment”).

Breath, quite appropriately, was programmed into the *Body* segment of *Tapping the Pulse*. Yet, as I’ve indicated in a previous article on this work, it is partially structured around a formal interplay between portrait and landscape formats;³ and I would now add that this can be seen to take us into what one might call the geography of the body. Furthermore, what this suggests for the apprehension of Dadson’s work as a whole is that the application of categories such as *Geography/Body/Sonics* as a tripartite dividing device mostly serves to highlight dominant tendencies in a set of works rather than any essential qualities. The sonic dimension is clearly fundamental to all of Dadson’s video and performance work but there are also frequent and subtle inter-relations and analogies between forms of “geographical” and “body” mapping.

The strong inter-relations between individual works in Dadson’s expanding oeuvre, indicative

of his highly coherent aesthetic, were confirmed again for me by a viewing of the recent work *Flutter* (2004, a Polar Project). In this 9-minute video, shot on Arrival Heights, Scott Base, an elevated landscape view – revealing sky, sea and land at two different times of day – is neatly bifurcated by the thin, golden line of a bamboo pole, which carries a small red flag at its peak. Upon seeing and hearing this video for the first time I was reminded of *Earth/Breath*, a single channel version of *Breath* fashioned by Dadson for the mid-1990s exhibition *VDU*.⁴ In this piece, reworked by necessity for inclusion in a programme of single channel work for exhibition in Germany, the two monitors of *Breath* (one delivering a “landscape” view of the body, the other a “portrait” view) were joined in a simple dyadic grid, but maintained their separate identity by means of a thin, black, central dividing line. *Flutter* works a somewhat different spin on the division of screen space, its central perspective point occupied by a figure superimposed on the ground of two finely balanced landscape halves. The work’s installation at Pataka echoed its internal triptych-like structure by mounting two speakers on either side of a large flat-screen wall monitor. Interestingly, too, *Chthonian Pulse* (2004), another Polar Project included in *Geography*, also worked with the triptych form by delivering its abstracted landscape imagery across a three screen set-up with an even toned soundtrack of environmental noise (mostly water generated).

The bamboo pole’s tropical connotations make for a sharp and unusual contrast with the bleak terrain of the Antarctic environment that clearly comes down to a matter of polar opposites. Although functionally just another marker, the flag in *Flutter* is transformed into a sonic conducting device for Dadson’s field recording aesthetic. And in that way it is analogous to the small, white, plastic electric fans that appeared in videos shown on several monitors in the media café during the *Sonics* segment of *Tapping the Pulse*, devices which



Flutter (2004)

Dadson has used in recent performances. These fans were also used in what was a highlight of *Tapping the Pulse* – a live performance by the artist in the Archive's mediatheatre, which took place on the 30th of March, the opening night of the second part of the exhibition (*Body*). This performance, which ran for a full hour, moved seamlessly through a set of phases, each marked by a different emphasis in sound or the use of the performer's body. The opening sequence featured Dadson's mastery of overtone throat singing, which culminated in an auditorium filled with dense layers of sound as loops controlled by floor pedals fed back earlier parts of the performance into its ongoing momentum. Dadson followed the intensity of this with a playful interlude in which he tossed and juggled large sheets of paper with a pair of conductor's batons. He moved unpredictably amongst his bank of largely invented instruments and out towards

the audience, all the while producing swathes of rustling, percussive sound. What followed was an extended sequence in which the artist, equipped with various sound altering devices including a battery of mini-electric fans, pored over his unorthodox group of instruments; elaborate, intermediate constructions falling somewhere between the stringed and percussion families. In the final segment of the performance, Dadson added moving images to his live soundtrack. Rapid traveling shots of the rugged surfaces of various Antarctic locations were projected onto the main screen and along the right-hand wall, thereby to a large degree shifting the register of the event from the performative to the live cinematic. Within the context of the exhibition as a whole, this particular performance provided as complete and integrated a portrait of the three highlighted aspects of his practice as one event could be expected to deliver. Like any Dadson



Dadsonics Live @ Rev (2002)

performance, whether solo or collective, it served to quicken the pulse.

Philip Dadson's career is remarkable in that he has been able to sustain a complex solo and collaborative artistic practice over a long period of time, both maintaining continuity with his past work and pushing himself forward into new areas. By bringing together key early works and a large selection of the new work that has emerged from the recent burst of creativity occasioned by his trip to the polar regions of Antarctica, *Tapping the Pulse* performed a useful mapping exercise on the flight lines of this unique artist.

1. From an interview with Martin Rumsby published in this issue of *Illusions*, p.40.
2. Curated by the author and subtitled *Chapters from the History of Video Art in New Zealand 1970s-1990s*, it ran from 1 April to 6 June 1999 at The Film Centre and a number of downtown Wellington sites.
3. Lawrence McDonald, "Remix Pastmaster: Philip Dadson's *Earth/Breath*", *Log Illustrated*, Issue 31, Winter 1997, p.31.
4. *Video Down Under: Recent Video Art from New Zealand*, curated by the author and toured to two German venues in 1995 and three New Zealand venues in 1996-7.