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Paper: THE NARKISSOS PROJECT

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**Abstract:**

This paper provides an overview of the prototype and the background to the concept of The Narkissos Project, an interactive image and sound art installation.

While my previous work has related to my own visage and the effect of the watery surroundings that I place myself in, The Narkissos Project casts the viewer as subject and seduces them into interacting with their own watery “reflection” through the familiar sensations of touch, vision, and sound. In The Narkissos Project, the spectator's transition into another world happens through touching their own fictitious face and moving pebbles to disturb the water's surface both visually and aurally. Touch is the interface into the virtual world and the mediator of different languages and perceptions. To touch a water surface, to influence a mirror, to make sound when moving something are reactions which correlate with reality. I place the viewer as voyeur and at the same time subject, inside a shifting ground that contains both figure and water as one amalgam. The point of view is from outside looking in and under, operating in a kind of *lussuria ossidionale*; as sublimations of unattainable acquisition, just out of reach by the nature of our imperfect vision into water. As the viewer gazes at the pool before them, an image of their face is captured. As they begin to interact with the virtual watery pool by moving pebbles around on the surface of the interactive tabletop, the sound of water is produced. The viewer can create their own soundscape by moving a single pebble to another location or by sweeping a number of pebbles across the surface. At the same time as this soundscape builds, the viewer will begin to notice some subtle changes in their appearance. At first they will metamorphosis into a younger more beautiful version of themselves and then perhaps they will subtly begin to become less attractive. Finally, the viewer who interacts and continues to gaze at themselves for “too long” will ultimately begin to fade and disappear.

*Image of Narkissos Project Prototype***Contact:**[laurel@laureljohannesson.com](mailto:laurel@laureljohannesson.com)**Keywords:**

Art installation, fine art, image capture, morphing, performance, sound, tactile interface, tangible interface, touch feedback.

## The Narkissos Project

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### Abstract

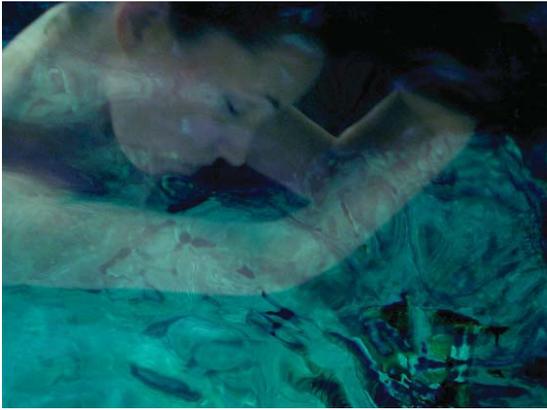
This paper provides an overview of the prototype and the background to the concept of The Narkissos Project, an interactive image and sound art installation.

### Keywords

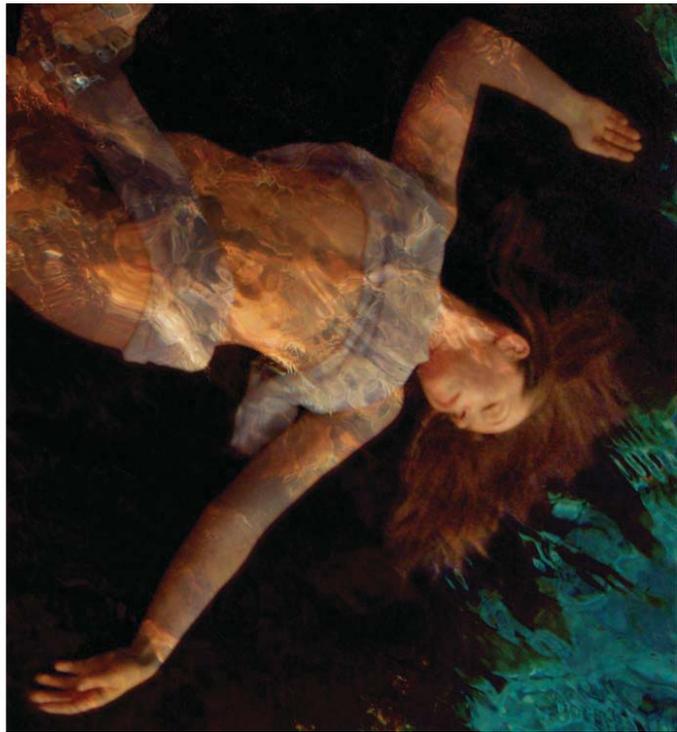
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### 1. Introduction

This project relates to the themes present in my ongoing artistic practice. Thematically my work is dependent on water and my body's relationship to it. Water seems to have been synonymous with creation for time immemorial. My work alludes to a fundamental memory that lurks in our psyche surrounding life origins from ubiquitous water sources. My images concentrate around my own body integrations into naturalized settings that are shallow depths of water along shorelines. I seek out specific locations that reveal minimal, but absolute characteristics of the water in each country that I work in. In some instances my presence relies not so much on my being seen, as it does on my almost not being seen. As the figure assumes to take on characteristics of the surrounding qualities of light or shadow, textures of rock or submerged surfaces ; one might ask if the figure is truly present at all. Or is it merely a mirage swimming up from our imagination, like so many sailors' accounts of sighting the elusive form of their desire.



*Figures 1-3: Images of previous work. "Metamorphosis" and "Thirst" Series'. Laurel Johannesson, 2005-2007.*



Figures 4-5: Images of previous work. "Metamorphosis" and "Thirst" Series'. Laurel Johannesson, 2005-2007.



Figures 6-7: Images of previous work. "Metamorphosis" and "Thirst" Series'. Laurel Johannesson, 2005-2007.

While my previous work has related to my own visage and the effect of the watery surroundings that I place myself in, The Narkissos Project casts the viewer as subject and seduces them into interacting with their own watery "reflection" through the familiar sensations of touch, vision, and sound. This paper will explain the conceptual underpinnings of the project as well as the medium-fidelity prototype.

## 2. The Myth of Narcissus

Narcissism can be traced back to the originally mythological narcissistic figure that since antiquity has been interpreted as a parable for self love.



*Figure 8: Narcissus is first documented in fresco paintings in Pompeii.*

Νάρκισσος (Narkissos or Narcissus) was a young man from the town of Thespiai in Boiotia. A son of the river-god Kephisos and the fountain-nymph Liriopé, he was known for his beauty, and attracted many admirers. But in his arrogance, he spurned them all. The suffering of two, however, brought down upon him a deadly

curse. First there was the nymph Ekho--a girl cursed by Hera to repeat only the last words of what was said before. When she was rejected by Narkissos, Ekho faded away in her despair leaving nothing behind but the haunting voice of her echo.

The other admirer was the youth Ameinias who became distraught when Narkissos rejected him and slew himself before his door, calling on the goddess Nemesis to avenge him. His prayer was quickly answered, when Narkissos fell in love with his own image reflected in a pool. Gazing endlessly at the reflection, he slowly pined away and was transformed by the nymphs into a narcissus flower. [1]

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, he speaks about the dialectic of identity and difference, contrast and assimilation metaphorically in the figure of Echo and the pond in which Narcissus mirrors himself. A mirror, by inverting reality and showing something that is there and at the same time not there, raises the same problems of presence and absence.

The motif of Narcissus seems to have disappeared from artwork for around one thousand years. It was picked-up again in the Renaissance. *Narciso* painted by Caravaggio, is a young man addicted to the ecstasy of his reflection on the water. [1]



Figure 9: *Narciso*. Caravaggio. 1594-96



Figure 10: *Echo and Narcissus*. Poussin. 1628-30.



Figure 11: *Echo and Narcissus*. Waterhouse. 1903

Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) describes the story of narcissistic self destruction. An ideal of youth and beauty leads to a life in beauty and the deprivation of reality. [5]

Albert Lewin's 1945 film, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* uses a painting as its centerpiece. The protagonist trades places with a portrait of himself and as a result, the painting grows older while Dorian Gray remains young.



Figure 12: Actor, Hurd Hatfield with the aging portrait of his character Dorian Gray. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1945.

Figure 13: Film poster from “*The Picture of Dorian Gray*”, 1945 with the caption “Youth’s adventure in living.”

### 3. The Narkissos Project

In *The Narkissos Project*, the spectator's transition into another world happens through touching their own fictitious face and moving pebbles to disturb the water's surface both visually and aurally. Touch is the interface into the virtual world and the mediator of different languages and perceptions. To touch a water surface, to influence a mirror, to make sound when moving something are reactions which correlate with reality.

I place the viewer as voyeur and at the same time subject, inside a shifting ground that contains both figure and water as one amalgam. The point of view is from outside looking in and under, operating in a kind of *lussuria ossidionale*; as sublimations of unattainable acquisition, just out of reach by the nature of our imperfect vision into water.

As the viewer gazes at the pool before them, an image of their face is captured. As they begin to interact with the virtual watery pool by moving pebbles around on the surface of the interactive tabletop, the sound of water is produced. The viewer can create their own soundscape by moving a single pebble to another location or by sweeping a number of pebbles across the surface. At the same time as this soundscape builds, the viewer will begin to notice some subtle changes in their appearance. At first they will metamorphosis into a younger more beautiful version of themselves and then perhaps they will subtly begin to become less attractive. Finally, the viewer who interacts and continues to gaze at themselves for “too long” will ultimately begin to fade and disappear.



Figure 14: Screen capture of participant interacting with *The Narkissos Project*.



Figures 15-18: Screen captures of participant interacting with *The Narkissos Project*.



*Figure 19: The face of the participant interacting with The Narkissos Project begins to morph into a more youthful and then a less attractive reflection of themselves and finally begins to disappear.*

### **3.1 Sound Component**

The sound created by the participant is made up of recorded samples that I collected in caves and along shorelines in Greece. Drips, drops, echos, swooshes. The more pebbles in play, the more sound combinations created. Different motions and combinations and of pebbles will generate different results.

### **3.2 Water Component**

The interactive water layer consists of video footage also shot in the Aegean Sea. As the participant interacts the placement of the pebbles will trigger a pooling action that will disperse the water layer in relation to the size of the pebble.

### **3.3 Tangible User Interface**

The pebbles collected along shore lines in Greece act as the tangible user interface for the sound and related visual effects. The pebbles will not have specific properties attached to each individual object but will however have general characteristics related to their size. Smaller pebbles will trigger softer and higher

pitched sounds. Larger pebbles will correspond to louder and deeper tones and will disperse more water. The more pebbles in action, the more complex the sound.



Figure 20: Tangible user interface pebbles.

### 3.4 Morphing Component

After a short period of time the participant's face will subtly morph into a more attractive (or seemingly younger) version of themselves. After more interaction the viewer may notice a subtle aging. This could be achieved by incorporating morphing software. Some potential approaches to this aspect of the interaction are described in the paper *Data Driven Enhancement of Facial Attractiveness*. [4]

In addition, *MovieReshape: Tracking and Reshaping of Humans in Videos* could point to potential solutions for this aspect of the project. [2] The concept of the golden ratio will be utilized and I will continue to explore and develop this aspect of The Narkissos Project.

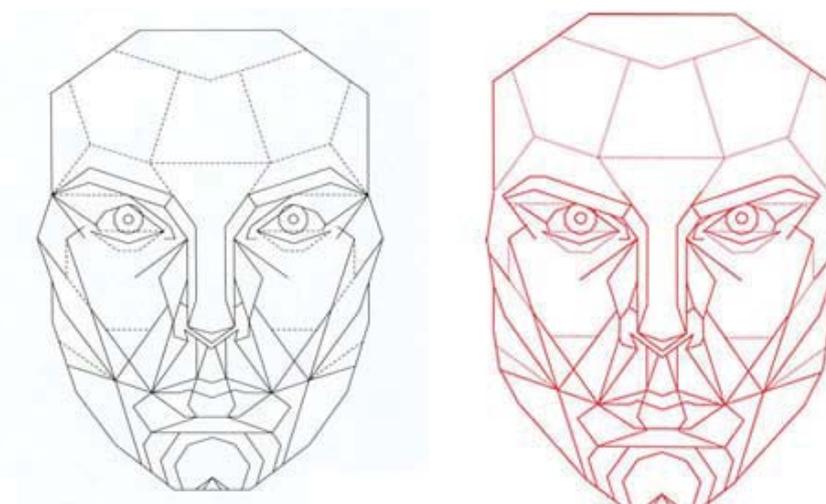
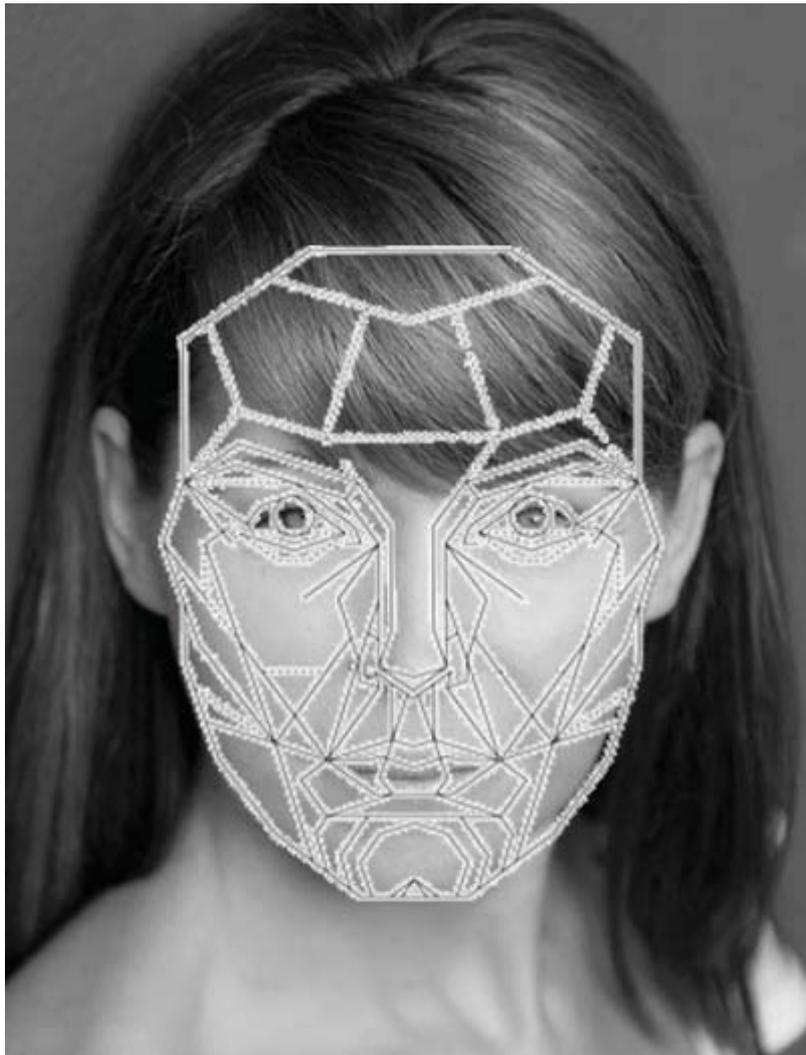


Figure 21: Golden Ratio – Female and Male



*Figure 22: Portrait of the artist with the golden ratio applied.*

#### **4. Strengths and Challenges of the Narkissos Project**

Although the project is conceptually sound, the greatest perceived challenge is in regard to the morphing aspect. While research exists regarding video and still image morphing, it will require a great deal of refinement in order to be effective within the parameters of the concept. The morphing must remain subtle and delicate in order to retain the likeness of the subject.

The simplicity of the tangible user interface will encourage viewers of all ages to interact. No fine motor skills, musical skill, or artistic talent are necessary to quickly become engaged with the interaction. The sound emitted will be harmonious by default. Visual clues in the way of water dispersion created by pebble placement will relate directly to the sound.

Finally, the fascination of watching one's self transform combined with tangible user interface controlled sound will entice even the novice narcissist into a brief trip into the watery abyss.

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