



# ARCHIE BARRY FISTIMUFF

28 November to 14 February 2021

WASH STATE



Archie Barry's *Fistimuff* takes the form of an expanded self-portrait inhabiting a space between video artwork, poetry, performance, home recording and music video. In it, the camera trails a central protagonist—who is also the artist—as they move through domestic and suburban spaces rendered alien by colour shift technology: the imagery is cast in electric shades of pink.

A seeming contradiction in terms underscores *Fistimuff* in the central refrain of its spoken word soundtrack: '*This body is not real / This body is not fake*'. These incongruous propositions generate a cognitive dissonance between the poles of 'the real' and 'the unreal' and provide a scaffolding from which Barry hangs various thematic concerns including touch, home and sexuality.

The body in question is at once a living, breathing being going about daily activities, and at the same time a digital body, at times moving unnaturally, and inhabiting a virtual realm that resembles our own but that also looks very different from what we know. A *sur*-reality is produced that settles in the cracks between what is familiar—domesticity, normal human movement, the banality of everyday experience—and the uncanny. In this world, the protagonist's pitch-shifted lyrics and strange movements take on an air of paranormal agency.

The inverted colour scheme, too, creates a strangely visceral, almost fleshy space that's not usually associated with the aesthetics of the digital, which is more commonly portrayed as inhospitable and inanimate, and overwhelmingly blue and silver—not-surprisingly the consequence of Windows and Microsoft early user interface designs and before this, the green-on-black of MS-DOS and Windows command



line screens. Through colour, both on screen and in the flesh toned gallery space, Barry conflates aspects of the bodily and the virtual, the digital and real worlds, in such a way that confounds the distinction between what is inside the body and what is outside.

Returning to the work's central chorus, *Fistimuff* seems, then, to exist both as evidence and in defiance of its tautological refrain: '*This body is not real / This body is not fake*'. It is both real and unreal despite the inconsistencies these conflicting phrases suggest.

This kind of slippage in meaning is a strategy Barry uses as a means of dismantling linguistic constructs. It is often argued that poetry, with its looser grip on meaning and singular interpretation, is inherently well suited as an artform to critique



society's insistence on definitions and clear meaning. Of course, this takes on a political tenor when people who are trans, non-binary or gender-diverse live, breathe and go about their daily activities in a world that's still very much insistent about binary terms of reference.

If the narrative of the poem seems simultaneously to form and yet erode meaning, so too Barry uses the power of *gesture* as a non-verbal form of communication to reinforce and destabilise the spoken word. This strategy is deployed in *Fistimuff* as the protagonist slips freely between the motions of daily life, performance and states of apparent dissociation. Common human

movement is rendered strangely and gestures are emphasised as if the artist was inhabiting their body for the first time. The expressivity of the face is tested as if unfamiliar. The tongue is soft like a slab of meat, physically echoing some of the opening lyrics of the work: ‘*A tongue is a flab. What could a flab stab? What could a tongue touch?*’.

In fact, in preparation for filming *Fistimuff*, Barry’s approach was akin to a method actor approaching a film role. They redesigned their surroundings into the kind of ‘set’ they imagined this character would inhabit, frequented the public spaces seen in the work and changed their diet of music and food for a month prior to filming. They ate a heavily meat-based diet—ethically sourced as offal, bone broth and unpopular cuts of meat—to establish a different relationship to embodiment.

In an early sequence at the kitchen table, the protagonist plucks something foreign from the tip of their tongue—a tea leaf—seemingly to emphasise the permeability of a human body riddled with pores and orifices and separated from the world outside only by the membrane of a thin skin. There is a distinct emphasis on the eyes and mouth, and by playful suggestion of the title, the sex organs: the thresholds between inside and out, which are easily transgressed. The spoken words seem to reinforce this suggestion: ‘*Atoms are mostly empty / Electrons never touch / Everything is pushing / Everything away*’. This abstraction of matter as its basic molecular ingredients seems to suggest that at some point, everything is reducible to the same kinds of basic units, and that at this level, everything becomes both self and other—the limits of what is our body and what is the outside world are finally, irredeemably, broken down.









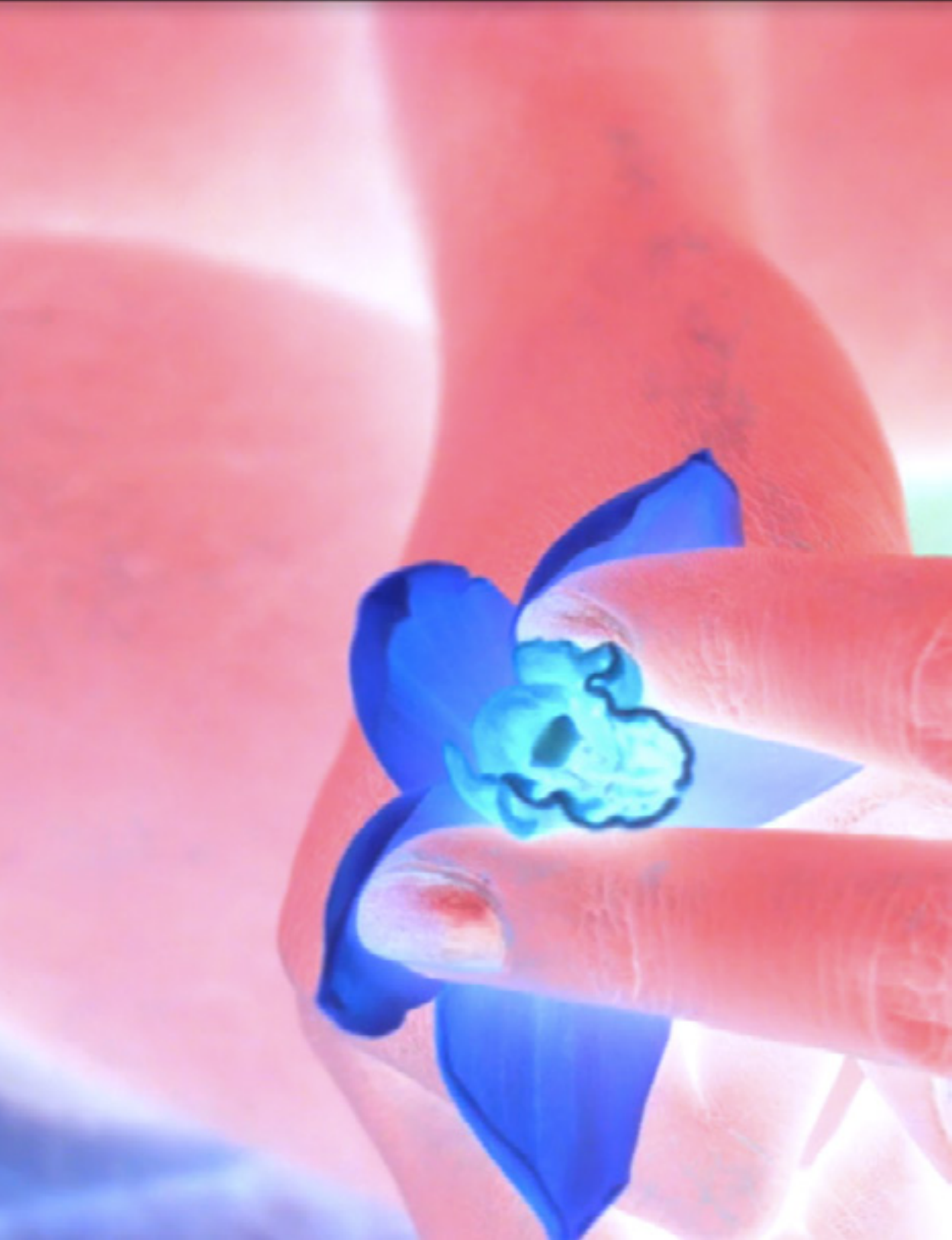
What is the effect of destabilising our more commonplace experiences of domesticity, the human body, language and gesture? What is the impact of this exploration of embodiment and estrangement; of the conflation of the inside with the outside or of this emphasis on the virtual body-that-is-not-real, on digital space rendered tactile and lush? The work is a journey through the alienation of suburbia into the uncanny, rendered somehow comforting—through ‘a palette of moods’ as Barry describes it, ‘libidinous, uncanny, animalistic, restful’<sup>1</sup> and to which could easily be added both banal and euphoric. *Fistimuff* presents a complex picture of what it means to be human. It presents a mosaic of a body that is neither real, nor fake—neither comprised purely of the corporeal nor the imaginary—but that is somewhere and everywhere in between.

<sup>1</sup> Archie Barry email to the author, 15 June 2020.

*Fistimuff* celebrates the irreducible complexity of being. Markers of identity are dislocated and float freely—hair, nails, décor, vocal timbre—while the footage dwells in the inherent complexity of personhood in its different states. In line with Barry’s broader practice, the video works against the oversimplification of a binary model of gender to propose instead a more nuanced and mutable picture of identity and selfhood. It presents an image of what the American academic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called, ‘the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically’.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, in *Fistimuff* Barry proposes an altogether more open-ended, fluid and multifaceted understanding of self that is in keeping with the nuances of actual lived experience.

2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Queer and Now’, in *Tendencies*. Durham and London: Duke University Press (Series Q), 1993. p.7.







## Biography

Archie Barry's autobiographical, process-led artistic practice spans performance, video, music composition and writing. Themes of personhood, embodiment, gender and mortality are considered through sustained moments of intense connection with audiences, often created through disquieting and uncanny bodily gestures, doubled voices, de-formed and re-formed language and the production of multiple digital personas. Barry's work has been exhibited in major institutions including National Gallery of Victoria, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Museum of Contemporary Art (Sydney), Contemporary Art Tasmania, Artspace (Sydney), State Library of Victoria, Buxton Contemporary and Sydney Contemporary Art Fair. They have presented and performed internationally at Parsons at The New School (New York, USA) and Minneapolis College of Art and Design (Minneapolis, USA). Barry completed a Masters of Contemporary Art at Victorian College of the Arts (University of Melbourne) in 2017 and a Bachelor of Art Education with First Class Honours at the College of Fine Arts (University of New South Wales) in 2013. They currently work as a sessional lecturer in Sculpture and Spatial Practice at Victorian College of the Arts (The University of Melbourne).

Produced on the occasion of the exhibition:

## **Archie Barry: Fistimuff** Curated by Brooke Babington

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Pages 2–3, 8–9, 12–13:  
*Archie Barry, Fistimuff* 2019 (still)  
single channel video loop, 11:07 min  
Image courtesy of the artist

Front and back covers, pages 5, 6, 10, 11:  
*Archie Barry, Fistimuff* (installation view), 2020  
Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne.  
Photographs: Christian Capurro

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