

## *Abstract*

### *Paranoid Fixations: art and political discourses since 9/11*

Global terrorism has presaged the emergence of new security states accompanied by heightened levels of social anxiety and irrational fear. This thesis investigates how contemporary screen and digital cultures have fuelled a collective sensibility of paranoia since the September 11 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre towers—a catalyst from which spectacles of irrational fear have emerged through global media networks. I contend that the escalating culture of paranoia, animated by the screen and digital media circuits of post 9/11, has resulted in a fixation with the repetitious potential of disaster as media events, which in turn becomes part of public consciousness. The thesis considers recent work by artists alert to this dynamic such as Gregor Schneider, Harun Farocki, Hito Steyerl, and Jane and Louise Wilson, all of whom are increasingly conscious of the power of contemporary screen and visual cultures in escalating societal fears.

Paranoia is a central organising theme for the thesis, which is explored through Jean Baudrillard's conception of paranoia as a fixation on the media's endless repetition of image events; Nikos Papastergiadis' notion of 'ambient fear' in the wake of 9/11; and Franco Berardi's positioning of paranoia as a potential yet indefinable threat to and from capitalism. I consider these key precedents in relation to more contemporaneous theorists including Jacques Rancière, who disputes the Baudrillardian rupture between the event and its symbolic meaning; Patricia Pisters' reappraisal of Baudrillard's position on the image event within the multi-screen aesthetic of new media and cinema; and Hito Steyerl, who locates irrational fear within networks of global surveillance.

In light of these reflections, the overall aim of the thesis is to examine the ability of artists to work with the complexities and contradictions of the frequently anxious and confused worldview portrayed in much of screen culture and media. In discussions of my own artwork and other related artists,

I contend that certain artistic strategies may point the way to a mode of practice that is politically effective. I posit that strategies of irony, dissensus and estrangement are effective models for a politically attentive art practice, which does more than simply reflect our social anxieties.