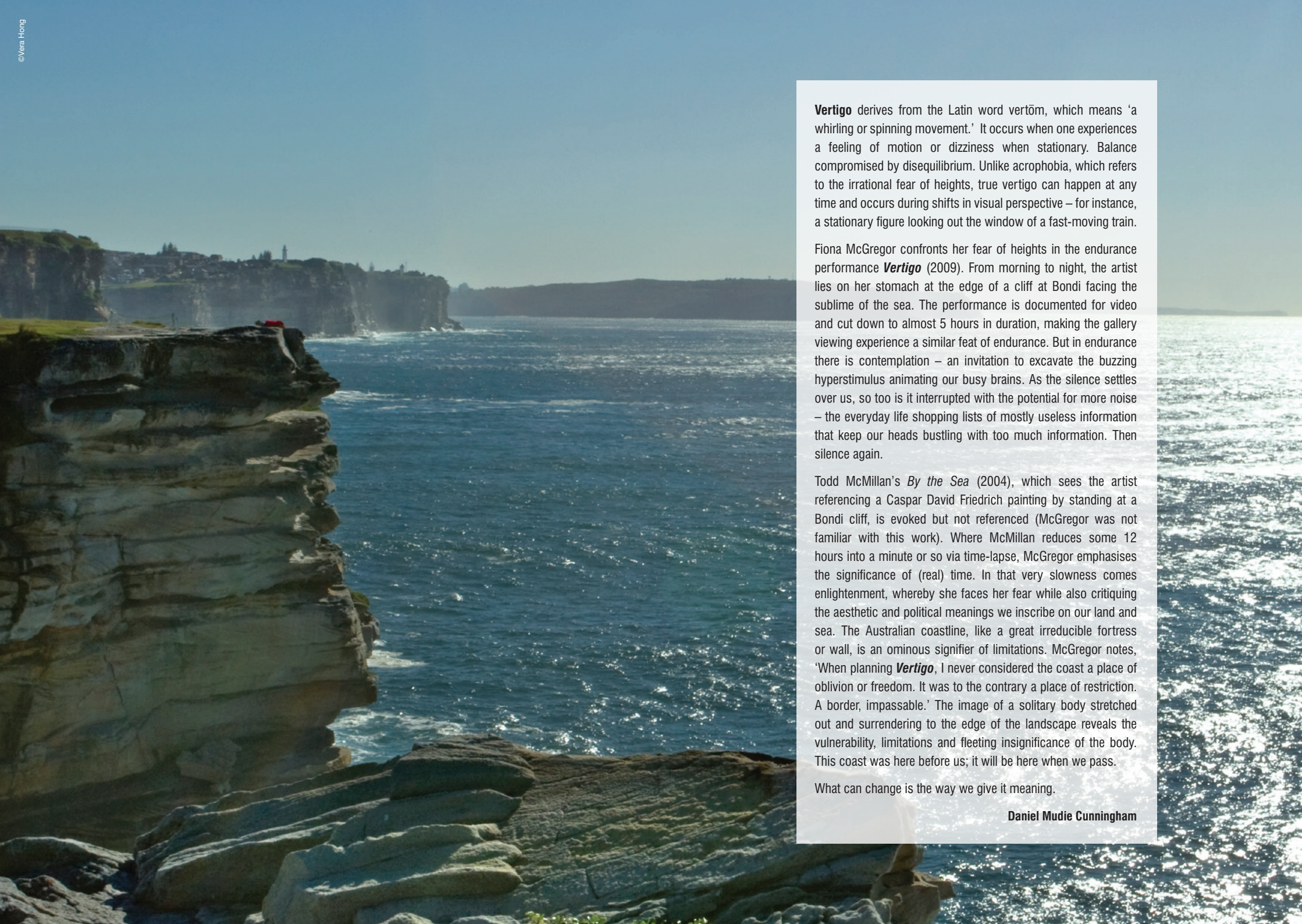


VERTIGO

FIONA MCGREGOR



Vertigo derives from the Latin word *vertōm*, which means ‘a whirling or spinning movement.’ It occurs when one experiences a feeling of motion or dizziness when stationary. Balance compromised by disequilibrium. Unlike acrophobia, which refers to the irrational fear of heights, true vertigo can happen at any time and occurs during shifts in visual perspective – for instance, a stationary figure looking out the window of a fast-moving train.

Fiona McGregor confronts her fear of heights in the endurance performance **Vertigo** (2009). From morning to night, the artist lies on her stomach at the edge of a cliff at Bondi facing the sublime of the sea. The performance is documented for video and cut down to almost 5 hours in duration, making the gallery viewing experience a similar feat of endurance. But in endurance there is contemplation – an invitation to excavate the buzzing hyperstimulus animating our busy brains. As the silence settles over us, so too is it interrupted with the potential for more noise – the everyday life shopping lists of mostly useless information that keep our heads bustling with too much information. Then silence again.

Todd McMillan’s *By the Sea* (2004), which sees the artist referencing a Caspar David Friedrich painting by standing at a Bondi cliff, is evoked but not referenced (McGregor was not familiar with this work). Where McMillan reduces some 12 hours into a minute or so via time-lapse, McGregor emphasises the significance of (real) time. In that very slowness comes enlightenment, whereby she faces her fear while also critiquing the aesthetic and political meanings we inscribe on our land and sea. The Australian coastline, like a great irreducible fortress or wall, is an ominous signifier of limitations. McGregor notes, ‘When planning **Vertigo**, I never considered the coast a place of oblivion or freedom. It was to the contrary a place of restriction. A border, impassable.’ The image of a solitary body stretched out and surrendering to the edge of the landscape reveals the vulnerability, limitations and fleeting insignificance of the body. This coast was here before us; it will be here when we pass.

What can change is the way we give it meaning.

Daniel Mudie Cunningham

VERTIGO

For twenty years, on and off, I lived in Bondi. I grew up on the harbour, and Sydney to me had always been a water city. From the age of 17, I lived in the inner-city, then overseas and interstate. At these times, I missed the ocean savagely. I wasn't sated by other seas: Port Phillip was a pond; the west coast of France a dull expanse. I needed that specific coastline of honeycomb cliffs and pale yellow beaches. I learnt to surf late in life, intensifying the connection.

In November 2008, walking the streets of Brisbane with Mexican artist Elvira Santamaria Torres, I conceived the performance *Water #1*¹. Torres and I were performing at *Exist in '08*, chewing the fat before our tech checks. We bonded over an obsession with water. Most of Australia was in drought; water restrictions were commonplace. At the time I was interested in stillness as a starting point for performance. Partly because I'm hyperactive, also because this state seemed to offer the point of deepest awareness, for myself and audience alike.

On my return to Sydney, I made the decision to pack up my flat and leave. The ocean section of the *Water* series was born.

When first approaching the lip of the cliff, I was so afraid I could barely crawl. Looking down was unbearable. It made me dizzy, nauseous. My body was fit, and the performance wasn't intended to test it. I had *Tidal Walk* to perform in two days, for which I wanted to be strong. Having done so many works in which physical pain was intrinsic, I wanted with *Vertigo* to challenge myself psychologically. I don't know when I developed a fear of heights. Certainly as a child I didn't suffer it: I was fearless, and reckless. But for some years now, I had suffered high anxiety vertigo.

I was heading overseas for an extended period and didn't know if I'd come back. I half hated Sydney, and Australia by extension, at this time. The expense, the materialism, the continuing xenophobia in spite of a change of government. And my old 'hood bottlenecked by traffic, getting whiter and uptighter¹.

Still, Bondi was hooked into me, like an anchor. *Tidal Walk* and *Vertigo* were done as homages, the former more personal and ritualistic, the latter as strongly determined by aesthetics as endurance and spirit of place. I always loved the golf course north of the beach, abandoned in

comparison with the popular Bondi to Bronte path at the other end. A haunted place, with its rock carvings whose very preservation is desecration, and that locus of despair, The Gap, visible from certain points.

What is the mind-body effect of fear bound with love? To be tied somewhere and want to flee at the same time. There are pragmatic problems, such as having no overseas passport. How could I really leave properly? The entire border of our nation is coastline, even if our country is much smaller than we think, one of hundreds in this island continent.

When planning *Vertigo*, I never considered the coast as a place of oblivion and freedom. It was to the contrary a place of restriction. A border, impassable.

Or was it?

Playing with a friend one day in my childhood home, I decided to hang off the top balcony wall. I had read the myth of Icarus and was making wings out of rhaps palm leaves. The first set had failed in their test flight off the low garden wall, but I'd get there. What did a few minutes off the balcony matter if I was eventually going to fly? (I wouldn't use wax or go close to the sun, sparing myself Icarus's fate.) I climbed over and hung off the other side with my bare hands, my friend Prue encouraging me. The bricks were curved and hard to grip. Two storeys below my dangling feet was stone flagging. It looked quite interesting from this angle. My mother, hanging out the washing, looked up and nearly died. I hung there long enough for her to run up two flights of stairs, haul me back over and issue a hiding. I could see her point, but deep down I didn't think I'd done anything wrong. I was about eight years old.

This is not the student of Vipassana meditation. The observation isn't of the internal, but the external, for its effect on the internal. The artist is unruly in her posture. Her legs kick up. She twists her head from side to side, rolls her shoulders to alleviate the pain. Stillness is corrupted; the discipline is limited to place and gaze.

Yet mind and matter do converge. The self dissolves. There is only place and time. Submission takes a while: the hour stretches. Some fine art theory reads the supine body as landscape, the

upright as human. But what of the supine body on its stomach, half erect? This is not a passive pose. The gaze is limited, tending downwards. Pain becomes irrelevant. Stillness may be the closest we can come to being in the moment but even then, blood, breath and acids are on their incessant journeys. And the ineluctable passage of the day, sun moving, the changing colour of the ocean, abating wind. Time is circular: opposite the day a curve of night, equidistant, inevitably approaching.

The camera is witness, guardian and authority. Each shot was filmed in one continuous take for the entire tape, meaning I had to stay on the cliff for hour-long blocks. Between takes, when the cameras were repositioned, I had the opportunity to move. The shots were framed to keep the focus on the coastline. The only time we see out to sea, a fence in the foreground dominates the body: shadows converge across the grass. Mostly, the body is tiny, overwhelmed by its surroundings, but always intrinsic.

Face your fear. Slowly, as the day wears on, the sight of the water surging below soothes. Not because the waves are gentle – to the contrary, they crash on the rocks with relentless violence – simply because they are. The constant motion, the infinity of the ocean, brings one directly into the moment, and the moment is everchanging. There is nothing more than this. This is *it*. And it is already gone.

I became hypnotised. Such an abundant place, but no animals. All morning an icy wind whipped down from the mountains, the chill factor probably about 8 degrees. In the afternoon, swallows appeared on the cliff below. Black birds, perhaps petrels, were diving for fish. I was no longer afraid.

Instead, my body was protesting. My neck and back ached, I had windburn, my eyes were swelling. But what did I care - I was now liberated, and in the most beautiful place in the world, changing, changing, changing.

Fiona McGregor February 2011

¹ To be performed at Artspace, 2011. A scratch version done at ZOOM Festival, Germany 2009. Details fionamcgregor.com





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TIDAL WALK

11 hour, 36 minute endurance performance – Sunday 14th June, 2009, Bondi Beach

A walk up and down Bondi beach for the duration of a tide cycle.

6.42am-6.18pm. Low tide, high tide, low tide.

13-14°C.

No rests taken, no food eaten, water drunk.

Every third lap, I filmed some video footage. I ended up with about 70 mins, edited it down to an 11min 36sec trace video, but decided not to show it. I did 18 laps either way, which adds up to approximately 36 kms.

Tidal Walk was a meditation on the paths we walk every day. No matter how familiar, the sand and water were different with each lap. The performance paid homage to the ocean as life force, engaging with all the cycles of the beach – oceanic, lunar, human – as they changed into day then back into night. One question in my head was where the tidelines of this beach will be in twenty years if the effects of global warming raise sea levels as drastically as predicted. In the middle of the day, at high tide, I was walking through water to the depths of the water tattoos on my calf muscles.

I watched the tides for a few months to time the performance to begin and end in the dark, at low tide. A Sunday gave me more human traffic to observe but being midwinter, the beach was fairly quiet. Despite the overcast skies, the light changed constantly. Time blurred. I felt the impact of walking on sand on the backs of my calf muscles and my feet within two hours. I enjoyed going to the toilet because I could sit down: luxury! However, I forgot to drink water after about the 5th hour, probably because it was cold, so I had no respite for most of the performance.

In about the 7th hour, a grinding pain hit my hip, which had gone out a few days before. It began to rain. I had no raincoat due to an optimistic forecast. But I didn't feel cold nor mind the rain, a light drizzle which continued most of the afternoon.

About 4pm friends appeared. I was grateful as I was now in considerable pain. (The next day I found out there was a pod of humpbacks playing off Ben Buckler at this time, but I was sadly too preoccupied to notice). I had company until I finished after 6pm.

I went to bed for nearly 24 hours, elated and exhausted. The bruising in my left foot took about ten days to heal, my hip about six weeks. I left Australia two weeks later, with good closure. Since returning, I've lived in the inner city.

Tides are caused by gravity – the moon pulling water away from the earth and back as it circles the planet. In one day there are just over two cycles, the day cycle slightly shorter, meaning its high tide line is lower than the night one.

Tidal Walk was the second performance in the Water series. It remains in a liminal place between ritual, ephemera and more conventional performance as evinced by photographic and textual documentation. Despite having abandoned the trace video, photographs from it may still be exhibited some day.



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Fiona McGregor is a Sydney artist and writer. Currently, her performance work is endurance-based, using the body as site, subject and material for a variety of concerns. Both her writing and performance return to spirit of place, the idea of home, and the limits and tests of freedom. She has performed and shown video work internationally, including Performance Space, Artspace, EAF, Interakcje – Poland, ZOOM – Germany, ART – Manchester UK. She writes essays, novels and reviews, and has published 5 books which have won or been shortlisted for awards including the Steele Rudd Award for best book of short stories. Her latest is the bestselling novel *Indelible Ink* (Scribe, 2010). Her travel memoir *Strange Museums* (UWA, 2008) recounts a performance art tour taken through Poland in 2006. This screening of *Vertigo* at MOP Projects marks the Australian debut of the *Water* series.

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Special thanks: Daniel Mudie Cunningham, George & Ron Adams, Julia Charles, Pete Manwaring, Vera Hong, Willurei Kirkbright-Burney.

Filmed on location at the cliffs behind Ben Buckler, North Bondi.

Bondi has many sacred sites, and was originally occupied by the Birrabirragal or Gadigal people of the Eora or Dharug nation. These clans and names are disputed. I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this place, regardless.



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VERTIGO 2009

Endurance performance done for film,
North Bondi cliffs, 11/06/2009

4 hours, 50 mins

Produced, directed & performed by **Fiona McGregor**

Camera, assistant director, editor – **Vera Hong**

Assistant – **Willurei Kirkbright-Burney**

Stills – **Julia Charles**