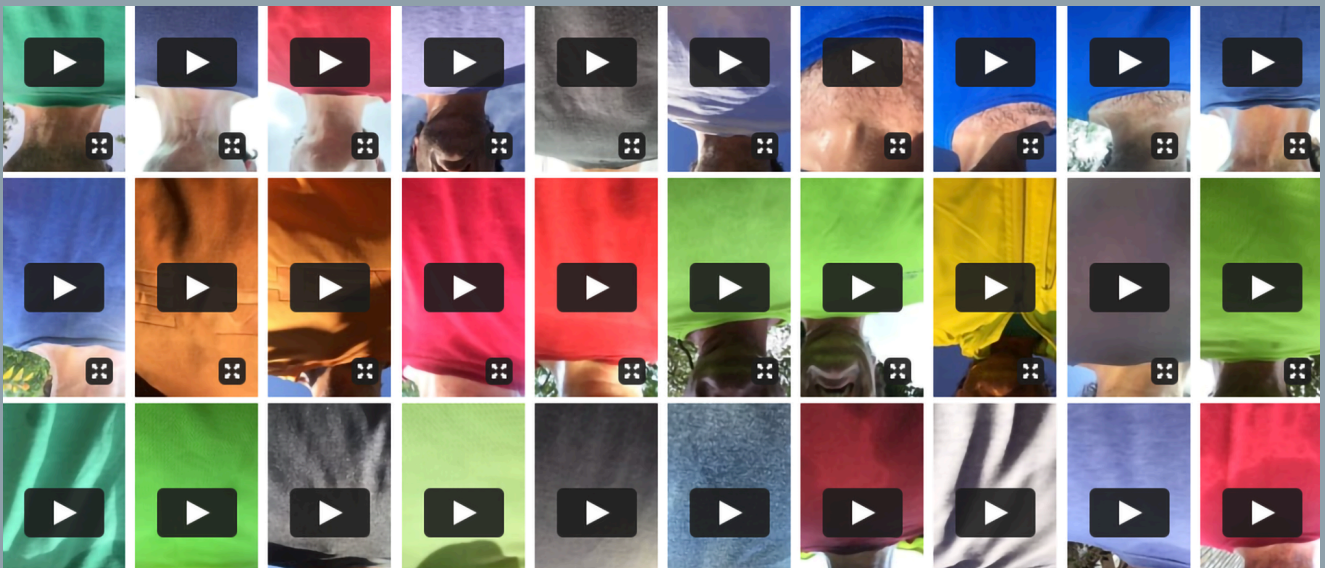




## UOA D32

ART AND DESIGN:  
HISTORY, THEORY AND PRACTICE



### RESEARCHER

Juan Cruz

### OUTPUT TITLE

*I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*

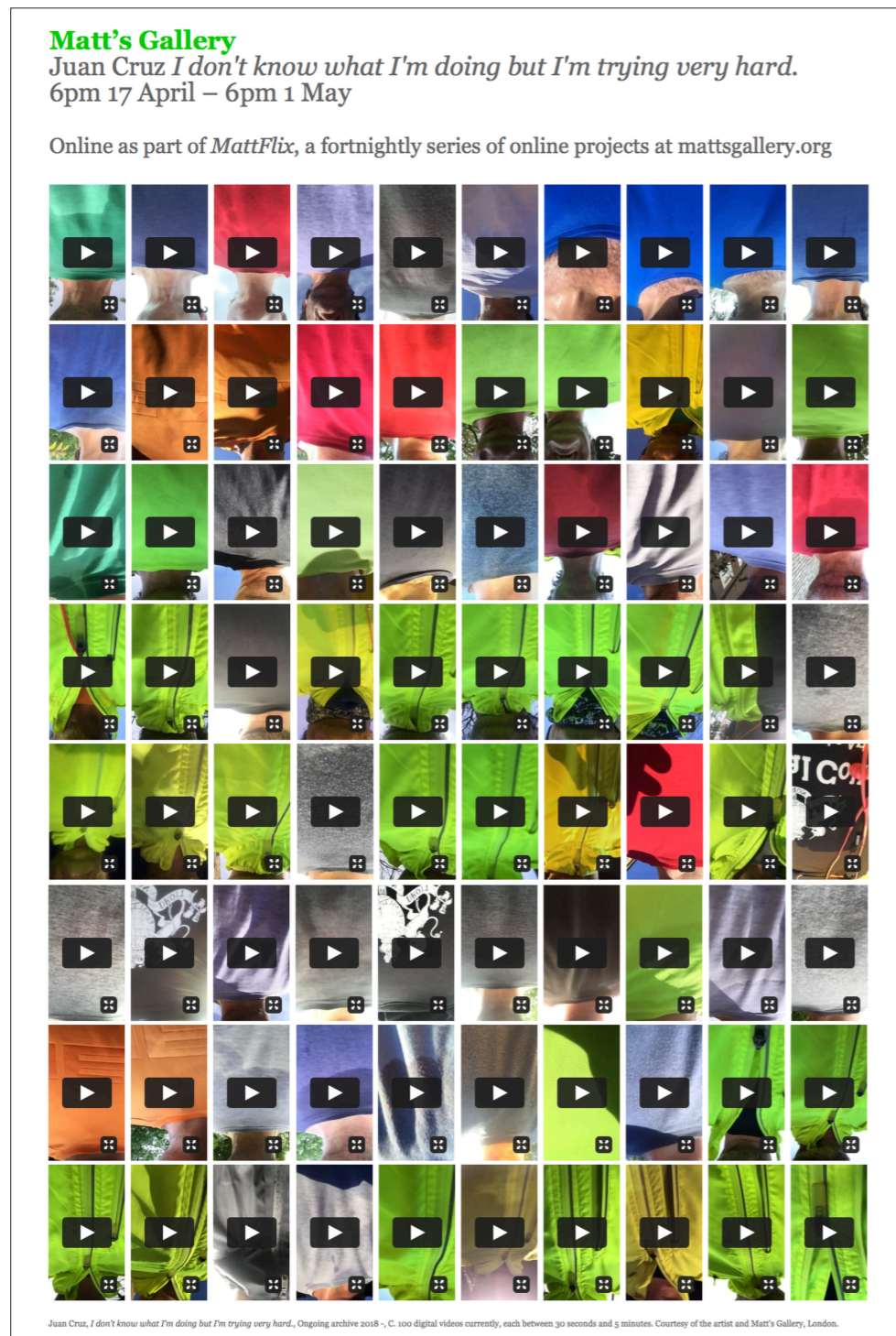
### OUTPUT TYPE

Digital or Visual Media

### DATE

2018 – ongoing

FIG. 1  
 Juan Cruz, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*.  
 17 April – 1 May 2020, MattFlix,  
 Matt's Gallery. Screenshot.



## 01 / STATEMENT

*I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard (IDKWIDBITVH)* is the title of an ongoing series of short videos, between 30 seconds and 5 minutes in length, and commencing in June 2018.

The videos are shot on the front-facing camera of an iPhone and each records a monologue spoken by the artist following the exertions of a run. The videos, which appear inverted and focus on the chest and neck area, are characterised by the breathlessness of the voice and the image of sweat-soaked t-shirts. There are to date approximately 100 videos in the series and they are designed to be exhibited as well as to be made available through a digital repository.

The work extends Cruz's longstanding interest in the use of text within the context of visual art. It brings together an investigation of the place of the autobiographical and confessional within contemporary culture with inquiry into the existence of works of art within the digital realm, as digital files with a contingent set of possibilities for their manifestation and exhibition.

The videos reference a number of characteristics and approaches towards performance developed since the late 1960s, specifically by male artists (Acconci, Nauman, Jan Ader). The videos filter these approaches through the contemporary device of the front-facing smart phone camera, the construct of the selfie and attitudes towards physical fitness and self-improvement.

Three of a series of 15 photographs, with which this project originated, were exhibited in Aarhus, Denmark, in a group exhibition, *The Catalyst Experiment*, 1–30 September 2017.

The videos were subsequently exhibited in a solo exhibition at Matt's Gallery, London (8–16 September 2018), a group exhibition, *DataLoam*, Vienna (26 February – 8 March 2019) and through an online exhibition at *MattFlix*, Matt's Gallery, 2020.

They have also been presented at guest lectures at the Royal College of Art, London, CAFA, Beijing and the West Bund Art & Design Fair in Shanghai.



Videos available at **Matt's Gallery**:  
<https://www.mattsgallery.org/mattflix/i-don-t-know-what-i-m-doing-but-i-m-trying-very-hard>.

DOI:  
<https://doi.org/10.7488/432f95cb-2a9d-4454-bc1a-0150bc7a801c>





**FIG. 2**  
 Juan Cruz, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*.  
 8–16 September 2018, installation  
 at Matt's Gallery, London.

## 02 / RESEARCH DIMENSIONS

The research is driven by three areas of enquiry:

- i. How works of art might exist in a digital realm, as digital files with a contingent set of possibilities for their manifestation and exhibition.
- ii. How an autobiographical and confessional idiom might have ongoing resonance in a culture where the modalities of the selfie and reality TV shows have become ubiquitous.
- iii. How text and language might retain a certain immediacy and vitality when used in an artwork.

The method of enquiry in the work is speculative and opportunistic, and originated with a series of selfie portrait photographs taken by the artist since 2017 after his regular weekly run. These works evolved into the series of videos, which, through their investment of voice and script, introduced a discursive element that had been missing from the original enquiry.

The videos are made following a run and are a subsidiary of that process, with the run lasting anything between 30 minutes and two hours. Initially, the run was undertaken not for the sake of the video or research, but in time, it has become a more conscious and active research process, motivated by the insights and images elicited by speaking and filming directly after undertaking it.

The words that emerge through the voice are spoken in the third person and reference the artist as 'Juan', followed by what appear to be reports of conversation between the speaker and the artist. The nature of these conversations is quotidian, relating to Juan's concerns about his academic job, his family and his status as an artist.

Cruz has developed a body of work using text in the context of visual art. These works have included spoken-word, simultaneous translations, as well as more formal texts in the form of short stories and plays, and scripts for videos and slide pieces. In *IDKWIDBITVH*, Cruz develops a new approach to text, which sees him effectively speak the words that come to mind unscripted in the somewhat dizzy state following the exertions of running.

The work has been presented in various forms, and will evolve through time. It is conceived essentially as an open-ended archive, which has multiple possibilities for its dissemination. During a public talk in Shanghai, the videos were shown on a large LED Screen.





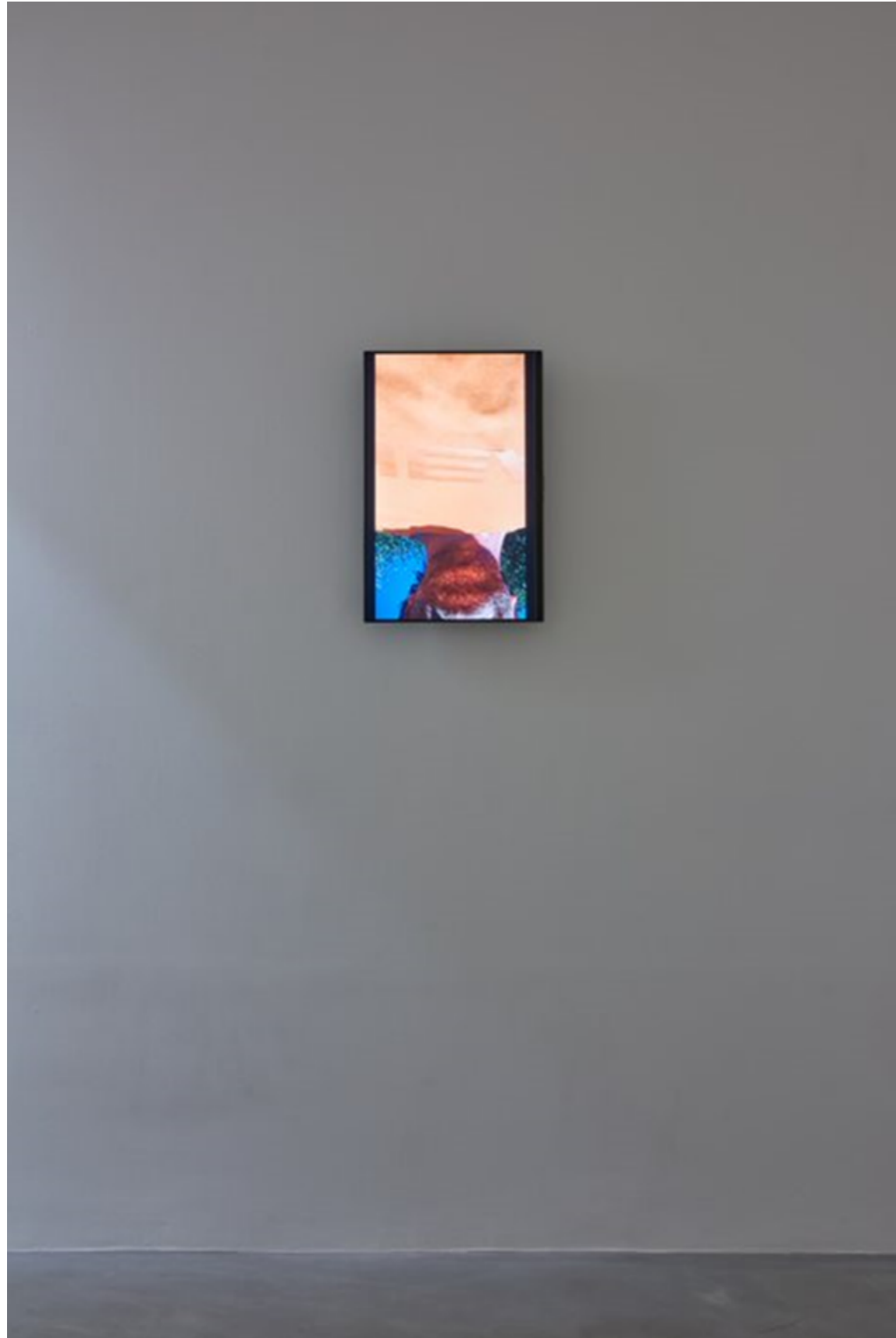
The set of 15 photographs.

FIGS. 3-17  
Photos by Juan Cruz, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*, 2016. Ongoing photographs, dimensions variable.



FIG. 18

Juan Cruz, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*. 8–16 September 2018, installation at Matt's Gallery, London. Photo by Juan Cruz, Matt's Gallery



## 03 / ORIGINALITY

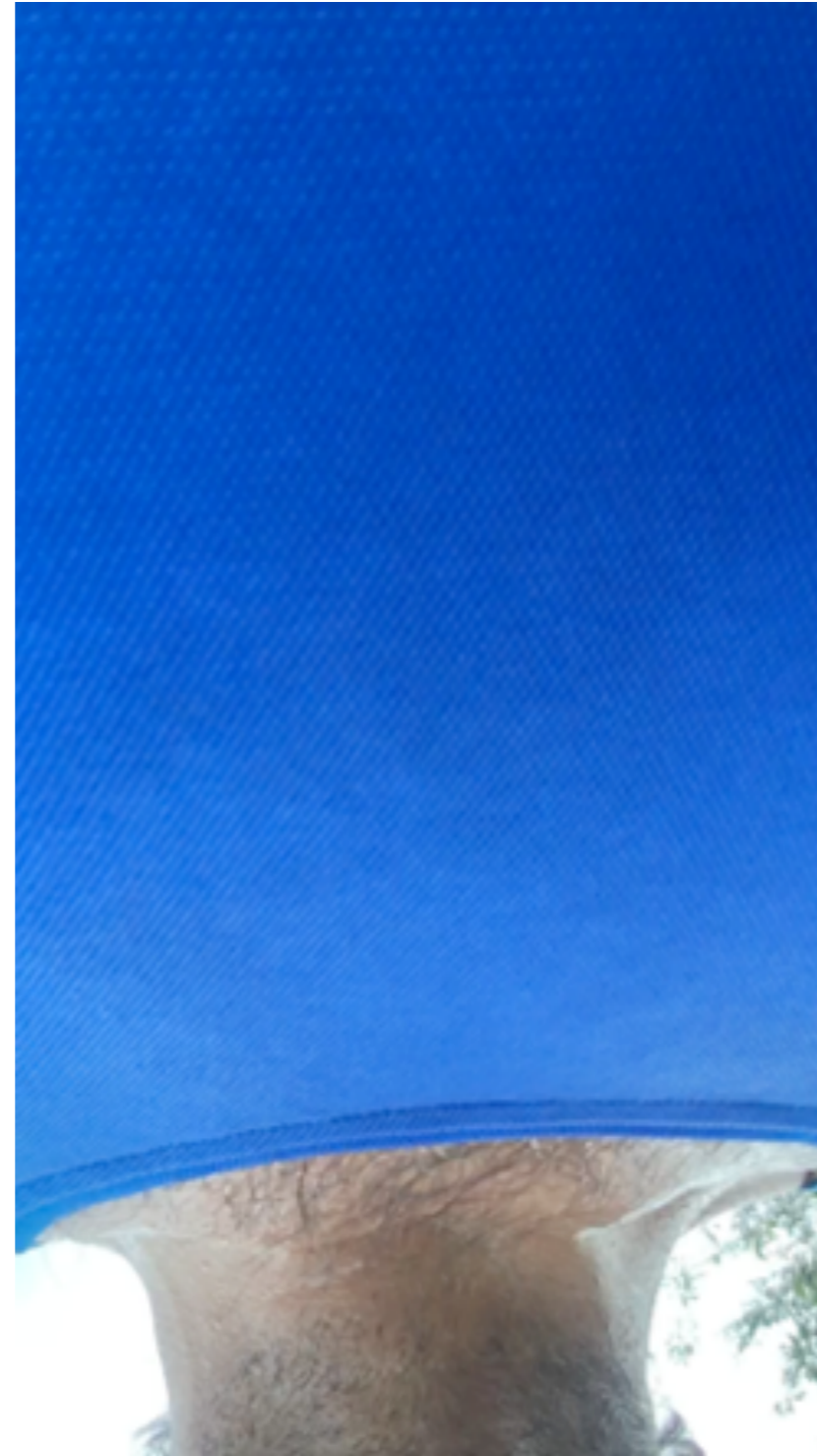
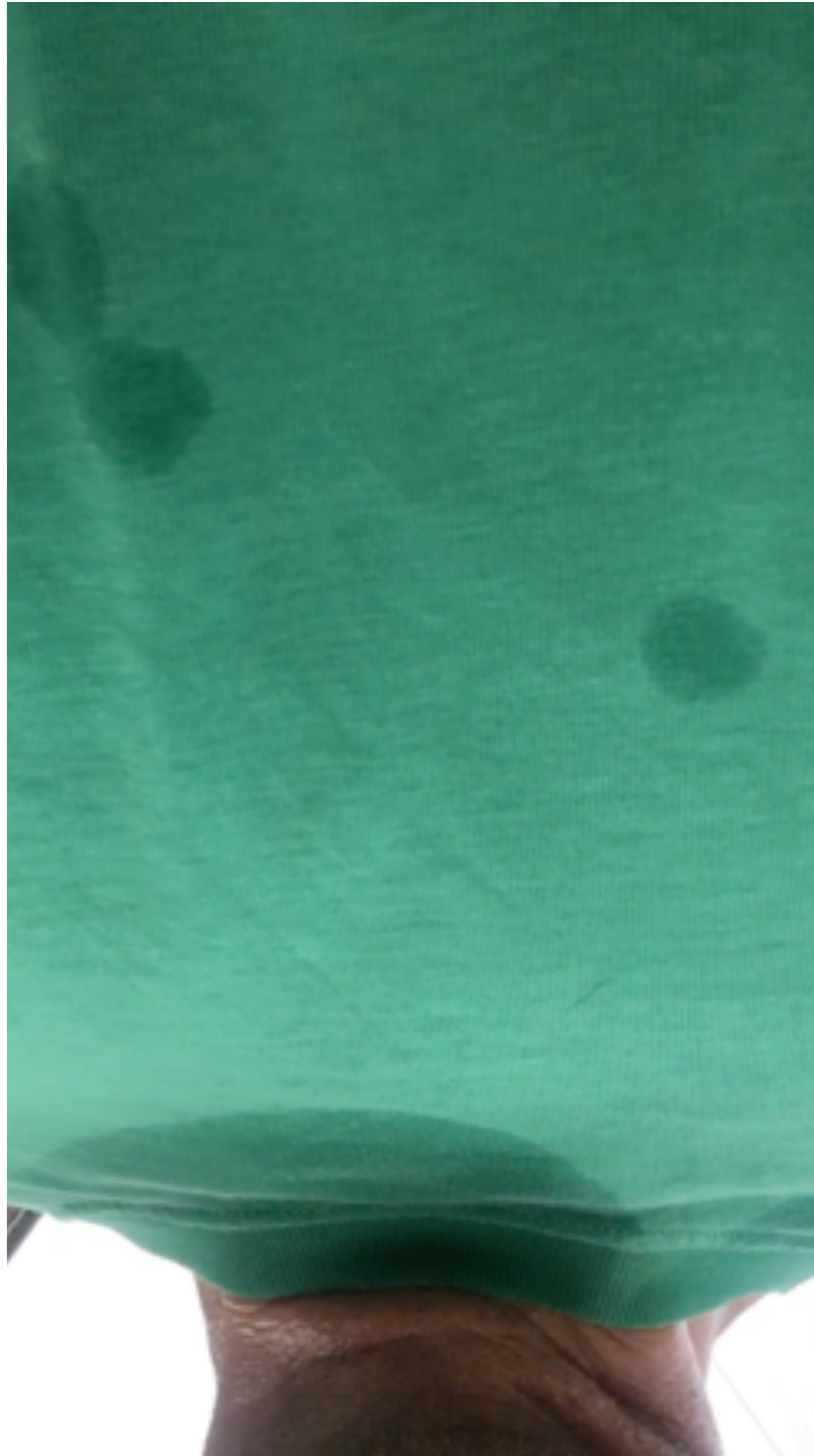
---

The work brings new insights to the fields of conceptual art practice, video and performance, integrating a reflection on digital technology with interrogation of questions of identity, masculinity and autobiography.

It also considers relations between word and image in new ways, with the combination of the monologue and the sutured image of the faceless body inviting reflections on issues such as the construction of self and the condition and identity of the artist.

The nature of the images that Cruz produces, and their provisional and fleeting quality, might also be seen as a commentary on the narcissism and politics of self in the age of social media. The work is also unusual in its construction of an ongoing digital archive, which frames questions of the relation between performance, seriality, identity and lived experience through the register of technological mediation.





**FIGS. 19-21**  
Photos by Juan Cruz, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*, 2017 – ongoing. Three stills from the series of videos.



FIG. 22

Juan Cruz, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*. 8–16 September 2018, installation at Matt's Gallery, London.



## 04 / RIGOUR

The videos are made more or less weekly. Sometimes, they are made more frequently and sometimes, longer intervals separate them.

There is a sense in which the runs are sometimes contrived for the sake of making the videos. However, they are also dependent on Cruz's psychological and physical state. In this regard, the physicality and psychology of making the work, and the conditions it requires, assumes importance. The work can thus be situated in relation to the work on the aging masculine body made by artists such as Roman Opalka and John Coplans.

Cruz never writes a script, but sometimes thinks during the run what he might say at its end. Sometimes the runs begin with a theme that Cruz wishes to develop. Most often, the dialogues are unprepared, with only the structured framings of the monologue – such as the phrase, 'Juan said' – known in advance. Occasionally, no words come to mind, and the videos are silent.

The inversion of the body on the screen is in part a technical issue, as the input microphone is at the bottom of the iPhone. More crucially for Cruz, it concerns the attempt to make something painfully autobiographical more distant and formal. There is reference here to Baselitz's inverted paintings and the notion of an image being somehow significantly changed by being painted upside down. The cropping of the body and the use of block-coloured t-shirts are responses to attempts to find a really economical way to shift the image away from being a talking head. There is no post production, and the idea of making the work function as something produced immediately and in one sitting is important to their intent.

The first Matt's Gallery exhibition included 9 of the works shown on a small single screen in the space, with cordless headphones for the sound. The order of the works was randomised.

The second Matt's Gallery showing came about as an online commission during the COVID-19 crisis lockdown in 2020 and incorporated all the videos that had been made thus far. It was presented as a kind of chequerboard archive.

In Vienna, the work was shown similarly to the first presentation at Matt's Gallery, with 9 works in randomised order on a single screen.



**FIGS. 23-24**

Juan Cruz, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*.  
8–16 September 2018, installation  
at Matt's Gallery, London.





**FIG. 25**

Juan Cruz, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*. 8–16 September 2018, installation at Matt's Gallery, London.





**FIGS. 26-27**

Juan Cruz, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*.  
8-16 September 2018, installation  
at Matt's Gallery, London.





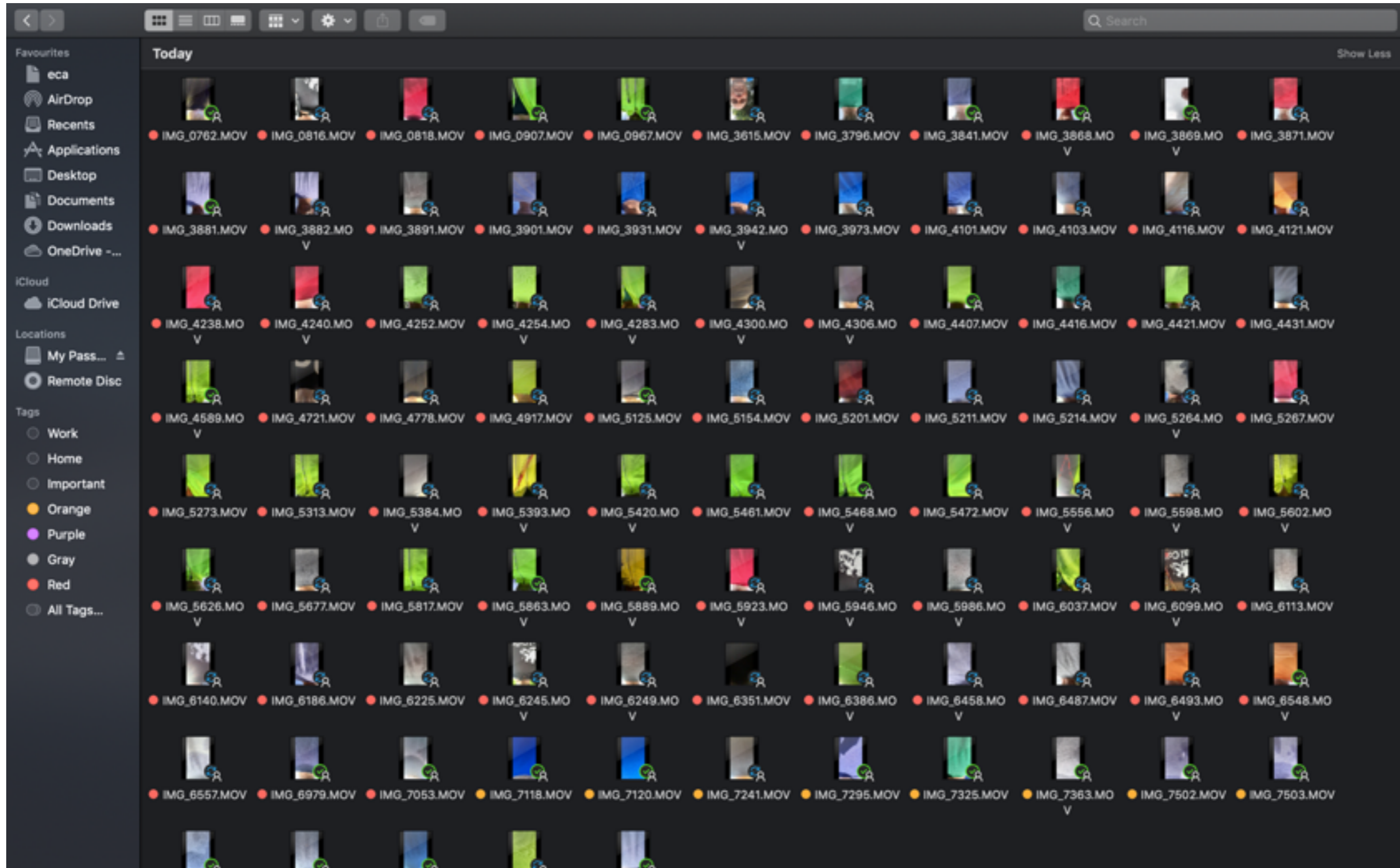
**FIGS. 28-29**

Juan Cruz, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*.  
8–16 September 2018, installation  
at Matt's Gallery, London.





FIG. 30  
Juan Cruz, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*.  
Screenshot, work in progress  
folder 2019. Image by Juan Cruz.



FIGS. 31-32

Juan Cruz, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*.  
8–16 September 2018, installation  
at Matt's Gallery, London.



## 05 / SIGNIFICANCE

Three of a series of 15 photographs on which the project was based, were exhibited in a group exhibition, *The Catalyst Experiment*, KH7artspace, Sydhavnsgade 7, Aarhus Havn, Denmark, 1–31 September, 2017.

The videos were first exhibited at Matt's Gallery, London, 8 – 16 September 2018.

A second exhibition was an online commission by Matt's Gallery, called 'MattFlix', during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020.

Matt's Gallery is one of the UK's premiere spaces for cutting edge experimental art. Writing in *Frieze* on the occasion of the Gallery's 40th anniversary, Tabitha Steinberg said 'uncompromisingly devoted to the artists it works with, the gallery has not only helped shape contemporary art in the UK but consistently reshaped and evolved itself over the 40 years of its existence' and 'having hosted some of the earliest exhibitions by Jimmie Durham, Susan Hiller, Lindsey Seers and Richard Wilson, Matt's Gallery is credited with shaping the careers of internationally renowned artists.'

Cruz was subsequently invited to show 9 of the video works in a group exhibition, *DataLoam: Sometimes Hard, Usually Soft*, AIL-Exchange, Angewandte Innovation Laboratory, Franz-Josefs-Kai 3, 1010 Wien, Austria, 26 February – 8 March 2019.

The exhibition was part of a collaborative research project between the University of Applied Arts Vienna, the Royal College of Art in London and RIAT Vienna. *Data Loam* is a PEEK project for the development of the arts, funded by the FWF, the fund for the advancement and promotion of scientific research in Austria.

The Angewandte Innovation Laboratory, AIL, founded in autumn 2014, is an initiative of the University of Applied Arts Vienna that foregrounds contemporary art and artistic research as a driving force of innovation in Austria. The project was accompanied by a publication.

The videos have also been presented at guest lectures delivered by Cruz at the Royal College of Art London 2019, CAFA Beijing 2018 and at the West Bund Art & Design Fair in Shanghai 2018.



## 06 / APPENDIX

### Videos

<https://www.mattsgallery.org/mattflix/i-don't-know-what-i'm-doing-but-i'm-trying-very-hard>

### Online exhibition

<https://www.mattsgallery.org/exhibitions/i-dont-know-what-im-doing-but-im-trying-very-hard>

### Book

*The Catalyst Experiment*. ISBN 9788799986361. Catalyst Press, Aarhus 2017. Pp 151

<http://www.aarhus2017.dk/en/programme/literature-discussions-and-debates/the-catalyst-experiment/index.html>

<http://www.litteraturen.nu/artwriting/project-art-writing-2017/seminar-art-writing-as-an-esthetic-catalyst/>

### Publications

J. Golding, M. Reinhart, M. Paganelli (eds). *Data Loam: Sometimes Hard, Usually Soft (The future of knowledge systems)*. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2020, 499 pages.

ISSN 1866-248X; ISBN 978-3-11-068007-2, e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-069784-1.

<https://www.degruyter.com/view/title/569932?rs-key=XSKMsV&result=1>

Juliet Steyn, *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*, Juan Cruz exhibition review

*Third Text Online*, 6 February 2019.

[www.thirdtext.org/steyn-cruz](http://www.thirdtext.org/steyn-cruz)

### Press reviews

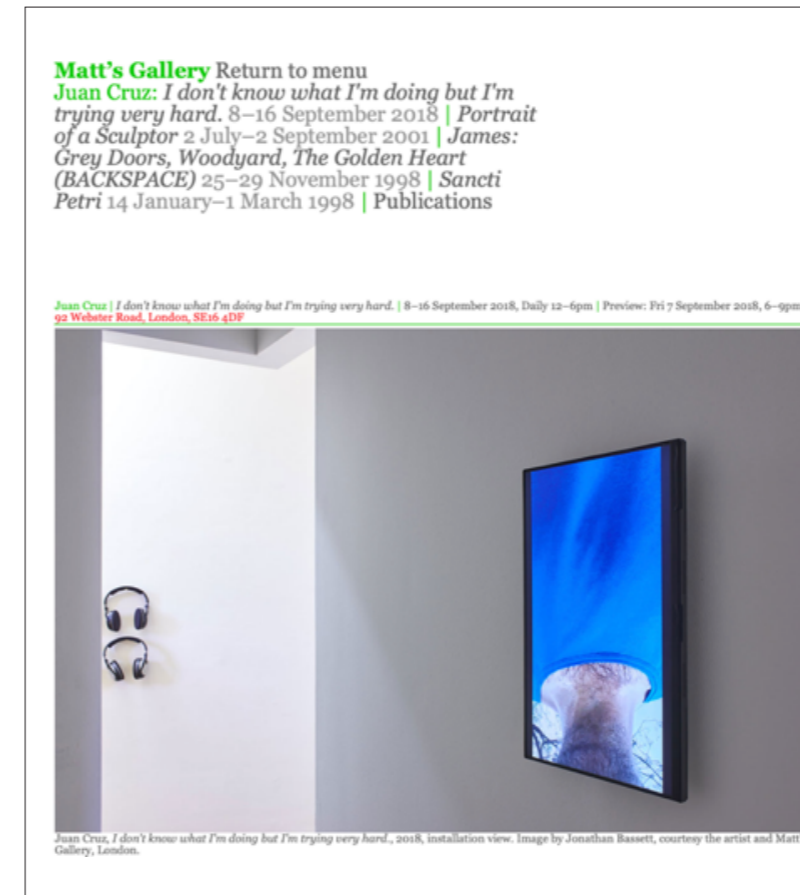
'The first two MattFlix episodes resurrected content from physical displays at the gallery. Firstly, Paul Eachus & Nooshin Farhid's video trilogy *Variations on a Ballistic Theme*, which closed prematurely as a result of the lockdown, followed by Juan Cruz's ongoing performative series of videos *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*, which is based on photographs Cruz took of himself after his weekly run. When prints of these personal selfies were stolen from the artist's backpack at his former teacher's funeral in 2018, Cruz created short video clips or 'autoobituaries' for his then-upcoming exhibition at Matt's Gallery. Filming himself with his phone, heavily breathing in post-workout mode, with only his torso in view, the artist referred to himself, his artistic practice, thoughts and life in a third person FIG. 1. The filming proved therapeutic to the artist and continued beyond the exhibition. By spring 2020, Cruz had collected over one hundred video messages of various lengths, some eighty of which were made available on MattFlix. Post-lockdown, Cruz's wheezing iterations were far more disquieting to experience than in the Bermondsey exhibition.'

Excerpt from Maximiliane Leuschner, 'MattFlix and Chill', *Burlington Contemporary*, 15 October 2020.

<http://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/mattflix-and-chill>

### FIGS. 33-34

Press information for *IDKWIDBITVH*, Matt's Gallery, 2018. Screenshots.



### Press Information

Juan Cruz's *I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*. is the artist's fourth show with Matt's Gallery.

The exhibition speaks to an interest and awareness of remaining somehow on the margins of art making.

The videos shown have grown out of a series of photographs made by the artist after taking a weekly run; photographs that were not originally intended as art works but which were subsequently noticed as images that might betray some insight. A rucksack containing a series of print outs of these selfies was stolen from the artist while he attended the funeral of a former teacher, and this experience affected a shift in the artist's thinking about the work, leading him to consider them as a form of auto-obituary.

Cruz's gestures strive to be slight and self-effacing while battling the essential ego required to do anything at all and think that others might want to see it. In this regard, the work speaks to Cruz's ongoing interest in the poetry of his namesake, the mystic poet San Juan de la Cruz and his famous assertion *I live without living in me*.

*I don't know what I'm doing but I'm trying very hard*. is characterised by a rather desperate, sentimental and hubristic desire to avoid aging, irrelevance and death. Cruz grapples with the shame and embarrassment of being an artist and the bizarre irony of wanting publicly to deal with that shame through the form of the exhibition.

The work currently comprises 12 videos, played here at random these total approximately 30 minutes.

Juan Cruz is Professor of Fine Art and Dean of Arts & Humanities at the Royal College of Art and is represented by Matt's Gallery, London.

Download the [Press Release](#).

For further information or visual material please contact us on 020 7237 0398 or email [info@mattsgallery.org](mailto:info@mattsgallery.org).

Matt's Gallery thanks the [Arts Council England](#) and Ron Henocq Fine Art for their generous support.





THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH  
*Edinburgh College of Art*

---

ISBN: 978-1-83645-036-8  
DOI: 10.2218/ED.9781836450368

All text in this portfolio is under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence. This means you are free to share and adapt this content provided you give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.

All images in this portfolio are All Rights Reserved. This means the authors retain copyright over original work and it is not permitted to copy or redistribute these images.

May 2020

The University of Edinburgh  
is a charitable body, registered  
in Scotland, with registration  
number SC005336.

*[www.eca.ed.ac.uk](http://www.eca.ed.ac.uk)*

---