In the early 1920s, towards the end of his life, Claude Monet stood on the Japanese bridge over the ornamental water lily pond in his garden at Giverny and took a photograph of his shadow. His head, wearing a hat, can be seen reflected in the surface of the water, barely visible at the periphery of the black-and-white photograph’s bottom edge. The ghostly presence of the artist in Monet’s enigmatic self-portrait anticipates Slater Bradley’s doppelganger project eighty years later, in which the double operates as a mechanism through which to interrogate the transience and permeability of identity.

Monet’s self-portrait appeared at the same moment, in the early 1920s, that Duchamp was constructing, in works such as *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) and *Monte Carlo Bond* (1924) and in Man Ray’s portrait of Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy (1921), an encounter with the self as readymade. As David Joselit argues, this encounter, at a moment when capitalism was beginning to construct the first technologically driven consumer culture, involved a confrontation with the shadow self in the process of commodification, as masquerade.\(^1\) Within this context, it is perhaps not far-fetched to suggest that Manet’s hat could be read not as the standard dress of an early-twentieth-century man outside in the open air, but as a quiet theatrical gesture by a master from an older generation at the end of his life, registering the dramatic changes that the new photographic technology was beginning to effect in the perceiving self, and using that technology
to create a shadowy self-portrait bordering on the cinematic that evokes Victor Stoichita’s observation that for the Greeks, “the silhouette [was] the immaterial double of the one who was leaving.”²

The confrontation of the shadow self through masquerade described by Joselit, and its implications for mortality, find their echo in Bradley’s doppelganger project, the first video of which was created in 2001, at a similar moment of dramatic technological, social, and cultural transformation. Like Duchamp’s project, Bradley’s project reveals identity to be a construct by filtering it through different personae. But Bradley’s and Duchamp’s projects differ in several important ways that indicate the specific cultural anxiety of the historical moments within which they occur. Whilst Duchamp’s fracturing of the self takes place within the framework of a sexually ambiguous doubling (Duchamp becomes the feminine Rrose Sélavy; a mass-produced photographic reproduction of Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* is made masculine by the application to her face of a moustache and beard), Bradley’s fractured self adopts an historical, literary manifestation of the doubled self, the doppelganger, whose identity, like Bradley’s shadow selves, is always male.
Furthermore, Duchamp’s alter egos—R. Mutt, Belle Helaine, Marchand Du Sel, Archy Pen Co., Marsélavy, the wanted criminal Hook, Lyon and Cinquer, Sarah Bernhardt, a monkish ascetic and a shaving-cream smothered satyr—are all imaginary forms of himself, acted out by him and constructed, conceptually and photographically, with Man Ray, whilst in Bradley’s project the artist’s personae are doppelgangers of real people—Kurt Cobain, Ian Curtis, Michael Jackson, and River Phoenix—all iconic figures from contemporary popular music and cinema, tragically deceased, and acted out by the young actor and model Ben Brock, who superficially resembles Bradley and takes on the role of his—and the icons’—alter ego. Bradley thus uses the blank screen that Brock’s role as an actor and model represents as a symbolic projective surface. Whilst Duchamp uses invented versions of himself as a form of reproduction, to undermine the fixity of identity and interpretation, Bradley’s doppelgangers are invented versions of deceased figures from popular culture, invested with the artist’s wish to identify with their symbolic power. If Duchamp’s project is a conceptual interrogation of the self through a mirroring process, Bradley’s, using the shadow, rather than the mirror, as the self’s representational model, demonstrates the shadow’s ancient, primary purpose: to make the absent present and to immortalize that presence. Bradley’s shadow selves are thus predicated not on distance, like Duchamp’s, but on desire.

This desire is, arguably, a condition of the doppelganger itself, one of the oldest symbolic figures in the Western world, whose aim, as the Austrian psychoanalyst Otto Rank points out, is not only to shadow the person, but to take them over completely: “Then I saw you, and wanted to become your You—but that won’t work, for I cannot go back; but you can go on ahead, one of these days you will become my Self.” Bradley internalizes this vampiric instinct by duplicating the doppelganger’s role; whilst Brock operates as Bradley’s doppelganger, his personification of icons from popular culture who no longer exist ultimately renders Bradley their doppelganger. In this triangle of shadows, it is not Brock who takes over Bradley, but Bradley who takes over, symbolically, the icons that he duplicates, in a performative masquerade of self-portraiture.
This performative core of Bradley’s project is underscored by Andrew Webber’s description of the doppelganger as one who “echoes, reiterates, distorts, parodies, dictates, impedes and dumbounds the subjective faculty of free speech… The doppelganger is a performer of identity. Indeed, it could be said to represent the performative character of the subject. Selfhood as a metaphysical given is abandoned… to a process of enactments of identity always mediated by the other self. The performances of the doppelganger are so many rehearsals of the double role on various reconstructions of the Lacanian mirror stage.”

The double meaning of “stage” in Webber’s text is deliberate and provides a useful tool with which to discuss the performative structure of Bradley’s doppelganger project and how it negotiates the boundary between reality and fiction. Brock’s performances in Bradley’s video installations, photographs, and paintings all take place on a literal or figurative stage, on which real and fictive situations are played out by a person who is always a double playing the role of someone else.

In *Trompe Le Monde* (2001), Bradley’s first doppelganger video work, Brock acts out Bradley’s daily routine in Bradley’s apartment, then walks into the elevator, goes downstairs, and disappears down the street. Brock’s final action (echoed in *Ghost* [2001], in which Brock, playing the double
of Ian Curtis and filmed by a security camera, walks into a museum then leaves) evokes a moment in the classic doppelganger film *The Student of Prague* (1913) in which the student “is numbed with astonishment when he sees his alter-ego detach itself from the mirror and follow the old man through the door and out upon the street.” The elusive presence of Brock’s body, seen in fragments through the camera’s framing and by its multiple reflections in the elevator mirrors, is heightened by Bradley’s manipulation of the video image. Its degraded black-and-white surface evokes the degraded texture of surveillance camera footage, dislocating the imagery from its everyday context and lending it a phantasmagoric cast.

The reduction in contrast between foreground and background in this depiction of Brock’s ghostly presence evokes Plato’s definition of the visible world according to “degrees of clarity and obscurity,” within which the shadow, unlike the mirror or other reflective surfaces, is dark, undifferentiated, and nocturnal. Plato’s observation accrues a psychological and technological metaphor in Webber’s observation that in the double, “the real is duplicated as phantasm in such a way as to defy distinction,” describing this ambiguity of distinction in the doppelganger, or “spook,” as having “something of the effect of a photographic negative.”
The photograph is, arguably, a form of a shadow, in the sense that it is inextricably linked to its subject, and acts as a trace of that subject’s presence. In Bradley’s doppelganger project, the images of the three iconic figures of Curtis, Cobain, and Jackson, whether rendered in video, photography, or painting, are all photographically generated, and their surfaces often altered, and the background stripped away. This abstracting of the central figure evokes medieval Byzantine painting, in which the image, a silhouette depicted against a background of gold, was a soul, or spirit, made visible, and not of this world. The image had no shadow precisely because it was a shadow—a doppelganger of an invisible spiritual being.

The concept of the shadow self as a manifestation of the soul has existed since the early writings of Plato; but in 1925, Otto Rank argued that the public had become increasingly drawn to the theme of the double, or shadow likeness, at moments of war, or great social and political upheaval. The unsettling impact of these moments of collective trauma triggered an inquiry into the integrity of the self and the contradictions contained within it. Bradley became preoccupied with the doppelganger theme after immersing himself in nineteenth-century Russian and European literature, in which the doppelganger consistently appeared, and at a moment of collective uncertainty at the end of the millennium, when the impact of the technological revolution signaled by the advent of the Internet was transforming the social, political, and cultural landscape.

*The Doppelganger Trilogy*, a group of three video installations, began in 2001, shortly after one of the greatest moments of collective trauma in American history, September 11, had occurred. Brock appears in each one, playing the roles of Curtis, Cobain, and Jackson performing imagined concerts. In *Factory Archives* (2001–2), Brock aka Ian Curtis, the lead singer of the legendary 1980s Manchester band Joy Division, is seen through the grainy haze of an apparently old, low-resolution, amateur videotape of the kind
that an enterprising fan would have made at a Joy Division concert before the days of MTV, smart phones, and YouTube.

Bradley’s appropriation of an out-of-date technology, apparently recording the performance of one of the most iconic tragic musical figures of the 1980s, uses anachronism to underscore the rendering of his subject as unreal. In a further twist, the videotape is a reworking of a tape made independently by Brock in 2000, of himself performing as Ian Curtis, to submit as an audition for the film *Transmission*, on the life and death of Ian Curtis, the script for which was written by Bradley’s friend Michael Stock. Bradley manipulates the video image until Brock is almost invisible, weaving past moments in the history of Curtis’s life and work into a ghostly projection in which Brock operates both as Bradley’s doppelganger and as his own double, expressing his own, as well as Bradley’s, desire to act the role of Curtis, within three different time frames—the fictional historical moment, the actual moment of the later audition, and the actual moment that the piece was made—collapsed into the two parallel narrative structures of art and cinema.

In the third video of the trilogy, *Recorded Yesterday* (2004), Brock plays Michael Jackson, filmed by Bradley in black and white with a Super 8 camera as he executes Jackson’s dance steps on the empty stage of a theater in New York. The glamorous showmanship of the star, in his 1980s heyday, is rendered melancholic and almost invisible, except for a clear trace of Jackson’s brilliance left deliberately evident in Brock’s meticulous study of his host’s form.
These twists and turns of Bradley’s complex doubling reflect the classic doppelganger form. As Webber explains, in Romantic literature, the doppelganger “embodies a dislocation in time, always coming after its proper event. Like all ghosts, it is at once an historical figure, representing past times, and a profoundly anti-historical phenomenon, stepping out of time…. [it] returns, intertextually, from one text to the other. Its performances repeat both its host subject and its own previous appearances, so it plays a constitutive role in the structuring of its texts, by doubling them back upon themselves. This function of return will be read as ‘unheimlich’—the uncanny—in the Freudian sense.”

Bradley’s doppelganger works epitomize this mechanism; the multiple doublings, and sometimes triplings, that occur operate as both a harbinger of death, a confirmation that it has already occurred, and the possibility that, through the shadow, it might be defeated. This paradox, built into Bradley and Brock’s relationship from the beginning, evokes Richard Meyer’s observation in 1916 of German Romantic author E. T. A. Hoffmann’s literary doppelgangers: “[they are] unsure of their identity, are sometimes inhabitants of this earth, and sometimes belong to some unearthly region.”

This uncertain state of being becomes evident once again in Phantom Release (2003), the second video in the Doppelganger Trilogy. Kurt Cobain, played by Brock, is seen playing guitar with his band, Nirvana, in an exact replica of the band’s clothes and instruments. The degraded, saturated Super 8 Kodachrome video image of Brock’s nameless, placeless performance
suggested the quality of an amateur recording by an unknown fan, positioning the action as a disembodied, unidentifiable masquerade.

The complex duplication of Bradley’s doppelgangers within this indefinable sense of place demonstrates what Marvin Carlson terms “ghosting,” a technique in which an audience experiences “the identical thing they have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context. Thus a recognition not of similarity… but of identity becomes part of the reception process.” Ghosting is quite common in theater, Carlson explains, giving an example he experienced in which “we witnessed Blumenfeld ghosted by Nathan Lane ghosted by Sid Caesar ghosted by Marlon Brando playing Brutus ghosted by his interpretation of Stanley Kowalski.”

Carlson’s description of the ghosting process as a theatrical mechanism confirms Bradley’s doppelgangers as essentially performative subjects, which, as Webber argues, are “more or less pathologically divided between reality and fantasy.” The doppelganger is fictional, but it cannot be written off as phantasm; “it insists on its place in the real… the subjective spook at once threatens and underpins the objective claims of realism.”

This uncertain boundary between reality and fantasy, by which all Bradley’s doppelganger performances are defined, signifies a crisis in selfhood that finds its historical precedent in the nineteenth century’s emergent mediums of photography and cinema, and in particular their capacity to produce a double image through the use of “replicating instruments” such as lenses, masks, and the split screen. “In a diary note,” Dietrich Scheunemann observes, E. T. A. Hoffmann “clearly establishes the connection between the use of replicating instruments and the [doppelganger’s] primary function to question a unified concept of identity: ‘I think of myself through a replicating glass.’”

For Bradley, this location of the doppelganger within the cinematic created a logical context for his final doppelganger work: a collaboration with the acclaimed cinematographer Ed Lachman, with whom he created two video installations and a group of photographic works based on the young Hollywood actor River Phoenix. One of the basic tenets of cinema, as
Christian Metz has observed, is the depiction of space as a kind of mirror in which the spectator, in the space of the real world, cannot see themselves. In this paradoxical situation, with what, then, does the viewer identify? With the person behind the camera, Metz answers. The cinematographer thus becomes the spectator’s shadow; a ghostly presence whose symbolic duplication of the viewer produces a filmic condition of the uncanny.

It is this condition of the uncanny, and its implications for identity, that Bradley and Lachman articulate in Shadow (2010). The innate projective cast of the shadow, in both literal and figurative terms, arguably renders it inherently cinematic, a state underlined by its fleeting temporality. Reliant for its existence on a precise moment that renders it continually in the process of disappearing, the shadow, like film, always operates in the space between being and becoming. The meaning of Shadow is predicated on the perceptual and psychological implications of this liminal state. Shadow is a film about its shadow; it is also the shadow of a film that exists, but remains invisible, inaccessible, and unfinished.

In 1993, Lachman spent several weeks in the desert in Utah shooting Dark Blood, a Hollywood film starring River Phoenix. Phoenix plays a disturbed young half-Navajo widower who lives like a hermit on a nuclear testing site in the Nevada desert, waiting for the apocalypse, and mourning the death of his wife, who was killed by radiation from the test site. A married couple traveling across the desert become stranded in their car and are rescued by the boy, who falls in love

Ed Lachman (center) and crew on the set of Dark Blood (George Sluizer, 1993).
with the woman. The film progresses to a dramatic ending in which the boy is shot dead by the man and becomes engulfed in flames as Navajo Indians burn down the shack to which he has been taken. Towards the end of the shooting, River Phoenix died of a drug overdose in Los Angeles, leaving the film unfinished.

Seventeen years later, Shadow constructs a prologue based on Lachman’s memory of shooting the original film that imagines the widower immediately before he meets the couple, folding into the story a number of references to what takes place in the future in the original film. Elements of the original film—the couple, the car breaking down, the attraction of the widower to the woman—do not appear in Bradley and Lachman’s film, and parts of their narrative—a little girl, a deserted house, a bar—do not appear in the original. Other elements appear in both films, creating a complex structure in which the two narratives are woven together by threads of fact and fiction, whose boundaries are never made clear.

This deliberate obfuscation of the line between reality and fiction is the lens through which Bradley and Lachman’s enquiry into the shadow self is filtered. Bradley’s interest in the ill-fated film that Lachman had shot in 1993 was partly predicated on the portent of death that Phoenix’s untimely end evoked and its symbolic implications for both the unfinished film and for Bradley’s doppelganger project. The collaboration between artist and cinematographer produced a unique fusion of art and cinema, in which Bradley’s engagement with the doppelganger took on a narrative cinematic complexity that, in turn, gave voice to the more conceptual aspects of Lachman’s cinematographic thinking. As Lachman wrote in his notebook during the making of Shadow, “One creates an illusion in reality, but what is reality but an illusion? So I revisited the illusion to find what’s left of the reality.”

Lachman’s note pinpoints the core of the doppelganger’s meaning. Shadow’s structure of repeated doubling is defined through its relationship to Dark Blood both as a film and as the recovered event of an abandoned film shoot. The literary model of the doppelganger’s continual return is echoed in Shadow in numerous ways. Lachman, whose participation in Dark Blood occurred as a cinematographer, reappears in Shadow as a coauthor, this time
shooting not River Phoenix but his invented doppelganger Brock, who is, in turn, simultaneously the doppelganger of Bradley, thus also implicating Bradley as the doppelganger of Phoenix. Lachman’s memory of shooting the original film becomes another kind of duplication, creating, as is so often the case in Bradley’s work, not a doubling but a tripling, in this case comprised of *Dark Blood*, Lachman’s memory of shooting that film, and the new film, *Shadow*, that emerged from both.

The doubles in *Shadow*, the most complex of Bradley’s doppelganger works, occur as figurative, as well as literal, duplications. Lachman and Bradley chose the same desert location for *Shadow* in which Phoenix had originally acted the same character. As Lachman observed, “creating a shadow landscape created some way for me to enter the original landscape and find a new narrative.”

Numerous other ghostings of the original film are folded into Lachman and Bradley’s intertextual drama. The centerfold pinup from *Playboy*, which the boy, played by Brock, burns in a fire in the night in the desert at the end of *Shadow*, echoes the erotic presence of the woman in *Dark Blood* with whom the boy falls in unrequited love. Her image disappears in the flames just like the dead boy disappeared in the flames when the Navajo Indians set fire to his hut at the end of *Dark Blood*. In *Shadow* Bradley and Lachman reverse the characters’ roles, giving the boy his revenge as he watches her disappear into the flames.

Another layer of doubling takes place when Lachman comes out from behind the camera by appearing in *Shadow* in a photograph of himself and Phoenix taken on the set of *Dark Blood* during a break in filming, which Lachman and Bradley found by chance on the location of the original film. In *Shadow* Brock finds the photograph at the bar, tucked inside another issue of *Playboy*, which the boy collects—a detail that appears in the original script. When Brock sees the photograph, he is confronted with the original actor whom he is portraying, photographed as himself rather than in character, in a dramatic breaking of the fourth wall that momentarily exposes the reality of the doppelganger’s doubling to the audience.

Just as the theatrical experience described by Carlson depends on the recognition of each actor’s ghosting of the next, *Shadow’s* meaning depends
on the viewer’s recognition of its difference from *Dark Blood*. Lachman and Bradley intensify the conceptual significance of this difference in a second, three-screen video installation titled *Dead Ringer* (2011), the final work in Bradley’s doppelganger project. Tripling appears repeatedly in Bradley’s work, as a device through which, as Paul Fleming observes, the doppelganger’s transfiguration can be made evident. It appears here in the form of three apparently identical video projections that are revealed, on close inspection, to be three different takes of a climactic moment of the final scene of *Dark Blood*. Each take, slightly different from the other, ghosts the last, creating, in true doppelganger form, a circular repetition of its own previous appearance.

In the shot, framed against the stark beauty of the Utah desert, Brock plays River Phoenix playing the boy immediately after he witnesses the husband
killing his dog after a struggle between the two men in which the husband fatally wounds the boy with an axe. Brock confronts the husband, played by Bradley who, like Lachman, appears for the first time and, by his actions and presence, both predicts and effects the death of his doppelganger, who, in the script for *Dark Blood*, dies shortly afterwards. Bradley and Lachman’s triptych illustrates Webber’s argument that the doppelganger is “above all a figure of visual compulsion… The self-seeing subject beholds its other self as another, as visual object, or alternatively, is beheld as object by its other self.”

The impending death predicted by Bradley’s character in *Dead Ringer* and scripted in *Dark Blood* was never, owing to Phoenix’s own death, finally completed. The only trace of the unfinished final death scene exists in a group of black-and-white Polaroid photographs taken by Lachman on the set, in order to check the light. In a group of painterly photographic works, Lachman and Bradley transform these images, enlarging them into otherworldly compositions in which Phoenix floats suspended against a gold background, devoid of any shading. In one group, a Polaroid of Phoenix, playing the boy on his deathbed, is collaged against a solid gold background, and the paper has been crumpled, in a metaphorical gesture that suggests the discarded usefulness effected by the actor’s untimely death. In another, he appears surrounded by a halo of gold-leaf dust. As Stoichita observes, in ancient Egypt, it was believed that two kinds of shadows existed: a dark shadow that confirmed the living presence of a person by its delineation of their physical body; and after death, a clear shadow, or “ka,” which took over the function of the double. Like the degraded surfaces of the doppelganger videos, the lack of dark shadows in Bradley and Lachman’s painterly photographic images evoke this second shadow, indicating Phoenix’s status as an immaterial being, whose “diaphanous body… allows the rays of the sun to pass through,” radiating a symbolic cultural power.

These haunting images of Phoenix, suspended in ethereal immateriality, recall the delicate surface of the shadow self-portrait by Monet that began this text. As Stoichita argues, in choosing to photograph his shadow reflected in the same water that he depicted in his paintings, “Monet’s own
shadow is etched on the surface of the representation like a figurative and paradoxical feature of a dual symbol of presence/transience.”18 Bradley’s doppelganger project creates a similar fusion of the artist with his subject, symbolically etching himself onto the surface of his representation in a continuous performative rehearsal of his own death.

5 Rank, 4.
6 Stoichita, 24.
7 Webber, 9.
8 Ibid., 4.
9 Rank, xiii.
11 Webber, 9.
13 Ed Lachman, quoted from Lachman’s notebook and discussed with the author, New York, August 12, 2011.
14 Lachman, August 12, 2011.
16 Webber, 3.
17 Stoichita, 45.
18 Ibid., 109.