

# Try Keeping an Open Channel

Western Front is pleased to present *Try Keeping an Open Channel*, a solo exhibition by Australian artist Archie Barry. Featuring three new video works and an artist's book, the exhibition reflects on themes of death, disembodiment, and transness to consider modes of perception and connection that exceed rationalism.

The “channel” of the title conjures multiple forms: a video signal, a waterway, a dream, or an altered state of consciousness. Each video similarly serves as a portal to a minor history. *Second Line Work* revisits Barry's childhood within The School of Practical Philosophy; *Dream for Reed* reflects on the inner life of pioneering trans philanthropist Reed Erickson through his archives of writings, self-portraits, and poetry; and *Water Builds Bridges* draws on Barry's own memories of loss and near-death experience.

Across the works, Barry engages technologies that evoke states of being out-of-body or out-of-time—green screen compositing, psychotropic substances, astral projection, and Erickson's fictional ASCID (Altered State of Consciousness Induction Device) imagined as a rotary telephone in a garden—to shape trans visions that resist the framework of visibility. By prioritizing sensing over explaining, Barry inquires into the limits and possibilities of representation and corporeality, giving new expression to the vibrancy, uneasiness, and complexity of trans life and loss.

The videos in *Try Keeping an Open Channel* play on loop with a total duration of 62 minutes. The works contain mature content including descriptions of traumatic events, death, mental health, and sex acts.

## ABOUT THE WORKS

### *Second Line Work*

*Second Line Work* (2025) is set in Mahratta, an Art Deco mansion in Sydney's northern suburbs, owned and operated by the local chapter of the global spiritual organization, The School of Practical Philosophy, in which the artist was raised. Over its ninety-five-year history, the school has blended teachings from Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, and Swami Shantananda Saraswati with strong Christian moralities. Mahratta has historically been a site of both spiritual awakening and coercion, where Barry was initiated into transcendental meditation, performed dance routines as a child, and later participation in residential retreats involving cleaning, cooking, and meditation.

Today, Mahratta hosts weekly classes, community events, meditation initiation ceremonies, residential retreats, and is occasionally used as a film set. Central to The School of Practical Philosophy's teachings is "second line work": a meticulous cleaning practice framed as service to the community and a means of connecting with the divine, historically assigned with both practical and punitive intentions.

In this work, Barry's body is digitally split into two headless halves performing second line work within Mahratta, while architectural elements, sculptures, and paintings are collaged to form surrogate heads. *Second Line Work* interrogates how ideologies of transcendence, mediated through these cultural artifacts, can be recontextualized to expose the complex dynamics of service, obedience, and power embedded within institutional and spiritual structures.

### *Dream for Reed*

Reed Erickson, an American transgender man and philanthropist, played a pivotal role in shaping transgender healthcare between the 1960s and 1980s, funding early medical research and founding the Erickson Education Foundation (EEF). The EEF produced newsletters connecting trans people across the United States to crucial support services. Beyond organizing, Erickson engaged deeply with New Age spiritual practices—meditation, telepathy, and animal communication—reflected in his funding programs, writings, and the EEF archives.

Many of his creative experiments were produced under ketamine, viscerally expressing spiritual ecstasy, paranoia, and encounters with otherworldly beings. *Dream for Reed* explores Erickson's visionary mental technologies for imagining new worlds. References to an "Altered State of Consciousness Induction Device," never realized, are interpreted here as a rotary telephone, staging a surreal conversation with wild dolphins and acting as a portal into Erickson's inner life.

The voiceover, delivered through burping, evokes both the overwhelming intensity of Erickson's archive and the bodily effects of ketamine. Collaged phrases from Erickson's notes and letters create a vibrant, disorienting world, while scenes of singing to and drawing over his self-portraits offer an uneasy reading of this important and complex figure of trans history.

## *Water Builds Bridges*

Comprising a video and an artist's book, *Water Builds Bridges* recounts Barry's experiences of proximity to death and near-death encounters between 2020 and 2023. Written over three years, the book features a diaristic text that shifts between present and past tense, blending factual, poetic, and intimate writing styles that mirrors Barry's changing mental states during this period. The writing addresses deeply sensitive moments, including a drowning accident, two miscarriages, the suicide of a friend, and episodes of mental health rupture. Interspersed within these narratives are insects and human friends, appearing at critical moments of connection, with recurring thematic currents of youth, death, and water binding the stories together.

The accompanying video uses iPhone footage Barry captured over five years in spontaneous locations: visiting a seal colony, lying in a hospital bed, observing the moon reflected on a river through a telescope while talking with friends, and accidental footage captured by a baby Barry helped raise in their queer, non-biological family. The montage stitches together extraordinary and everyday experiences, with select passages from the book scrolling up from the ocean's horizon. Its deliberate pacing and quiet atmosphere offer space to breathe within trauma, creating a meditative engagement with life, mortality, and fragile connection.

## About the Artist

Archie Barry is a visual artist based in Melbourne, Australia, who works primarily with video, performance, and music composition. They are drawn to time-based mediums to induce moments of affective intensity, drawing from lived experiences of loss, near death, and a politics of trans liberation. Attuned to histories of knowledge making and connection that do not easily map onto the "seen" or the rational, Barry's practice questions dominant representations of selfhood as singular, stable, legible, and sequential. Their works have been exhibited widely in Australia, including at The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Samstag Museum of Art, The National Gallery of Victoria, Museum of Contemporary Art, Contemporary Art Tasmania and Artspace, amongst other spaces.

# ASCID TRIPS

Susan Stryker

A single small sheet of lined paper, the words “MEMO from Reed Erickson” printed at the top, bearing a hand written note, “5/9/82 Aileen: What do you know about the space-time thing? Then apologized, said it’s some business thing she’s been talking to her lawyer about.”

On a standard-sized sheet of typing paper, a typed list of projects, undated, funded by the Erickson Educational Foundation (EEF), including “Project 3000: time/space machine,” with a scrawled annotation, “New ASCID type device invention of Dr. E. Letting go of the human self, becoming one with the divine self.”

Both pieces of paper can be found in the Reed Erickson and Erickson Educational Foundation Collection, housed in the Transgender Archives of the Special Collections division of the University of Victoria Library, a rich source of material for Archie Barry’s *Dream for Reed*, one of the works included in *Try Keeping An Open Channel*.

ASCID, as other archival documents attest, stands for “Altered States of Consciousness Induction Device.” Pun intended? Pun intended. (I think.)

An archive: now *that’s* an ASCID whose trips can blow one’s channels wide open, transporting one beyond habituated ways of being in the world, to inhabit the world of another. Archive as ASCID is my historian jam.

An airplane: ASCID of another type entirely. December 2023, I have flown from San Francisco to Melbourne for an academic conference, a colleague invites me to a lunch where I meet Archie for the first time, have my channels opened by some of Archie’s video work, we stay in touch through those channels, we meet again, in time/space asynchronicity, in the Erickson archive where I’ve conducted historical research on that wealthy trans man’s financial support for transgender medicine in the 1960s and ’70s, so many pieces of paper

there, so many little time/space machines that open channels to elsewhere, Erickson’s feral mind so rampant with wild seed it’s no mystery that Archie and I both found our ways there, to meet yet again here in these pages, still out of phase in spacetime, but our threads are tangled now. Hi, Archie! Great show, thanks for sharing the video links and texts.

Oblique references to ASCID abound in Erickson’s papers, but there’s never any clear sense of what it is, or how he—an engineer by training as well as a seeker of arcane knowledge—thought it would work. I don’t have a clue who Dr. E. is but Aileen is probably Erickson’s second ex-wife, mother of his children, often asking for financial support, so maybe she thought the time/space thing was real enough, close enough to market, to be a money-maker and maybe she could get a piece of the action.

I’ve wondered if ASCID was little more than a juiced-up sensory deprivation float tank, the kind you can find at any half-way decent woo-woo wellness centre nowadays. EEF also funded Dr. John Lilly’s research on human-dolphin communication, and John Lilly invented the float tank, and the float tank offers an experience not unlike the chemically-induced sensory deprivation of the K-hole, and Lilly and Erickson did massive amounts of ketamine with each other—you should see their correspondence with medical researchers and pharmaceutical companies trying to buy ketamine by the crate-load—so you have to wonder if maybe ASCID was Vitamin K or magic mushrooms or some other similar state-of-consciousness altering substance running around in the brain of somebody inside a lightless black box half-filled with water and Epsom salts. It can definitely get trippy in there.

But then again, Lilly and Erickson thought their psychonautics put them in direct communication with extraterrestrial intelligences who ran the Earth as a giant computer-generated simulated reality from their base in the nether reaches of the solar system, and part of me wants to believe that Erickson believed that he was on the cusp of creating something that would, by manipulating the programming codes of our ersatz reality, allow him to manifest his consciousness anywhere in spacetime, and perhaps in so doing become one with his Divine self beyond the *maya* of the phenomenal world. Wouldn’t that be *awesome*?

Transnesses of gender and transversal connections between different onto-epistemic domains go hand in hand, not just for Erickson, because—let’s face it—

to trans gender is to feel an immaterial connection with something on the far side of what modern society tells us the body means and does, and then to follow that feeling and go there, and to bring the body along. It's to assert the reality of a different reality, and to make that reality real by materializing it through one's practices of living. Trans-embodiment as ASCID: Whether approached as engineering by financially supporting doctors and clinics to cut and sew flesh and inject shape and mood-shifting hormones, or as a spiritual practice where consciousness is transformed by means of other techniques and technologies: that was Reed Erickson's whole schtick.

Archie's artworks in *Try Keeping an Open Channel* venture into the same quasi-extra-mundane realm Erickson inhabited—especially in *Dream for Reed*, which features a remarkably effective sequence involving the old-school classroom technology of an overhead projector to show one reality crossing over and registering in another: transparent, layered, overlain, manipulated, inscribed by bodies that merge with their tools. But it's there in the show's other pieces as well. *Second Line Work*, a reference to disciplinary/meditative practices that reward/punish bodies in the collective living space of an esoteric religious community, uses post-production video manipulation to literalize the bodymind splits and sutures produced by second line work. In *Water Builds Bridges*, death unsettles the frame life draws to keep its other at bay, then reaches in to snatch a body in its undertow. Archie's work shows how easy it is to alter some media—just do it, it's not rocket science—how artful it can be to alter it just so, and how consequential that practice can be when it involves the transition from one realm of reality to another.

Keep an open channel, and Archie's artworks can be an ASCID trip for you.

## About the Writer

Susan Stryker is a writer, historian, and public intellectual based in San Francisco, United States whose scholarship, media-making, and activism have shaped conversations on trans issues for more than three decades. Her work bridges academe, cultural production, and community service, advancing trans-oriented knowledge as a force for social transformation.

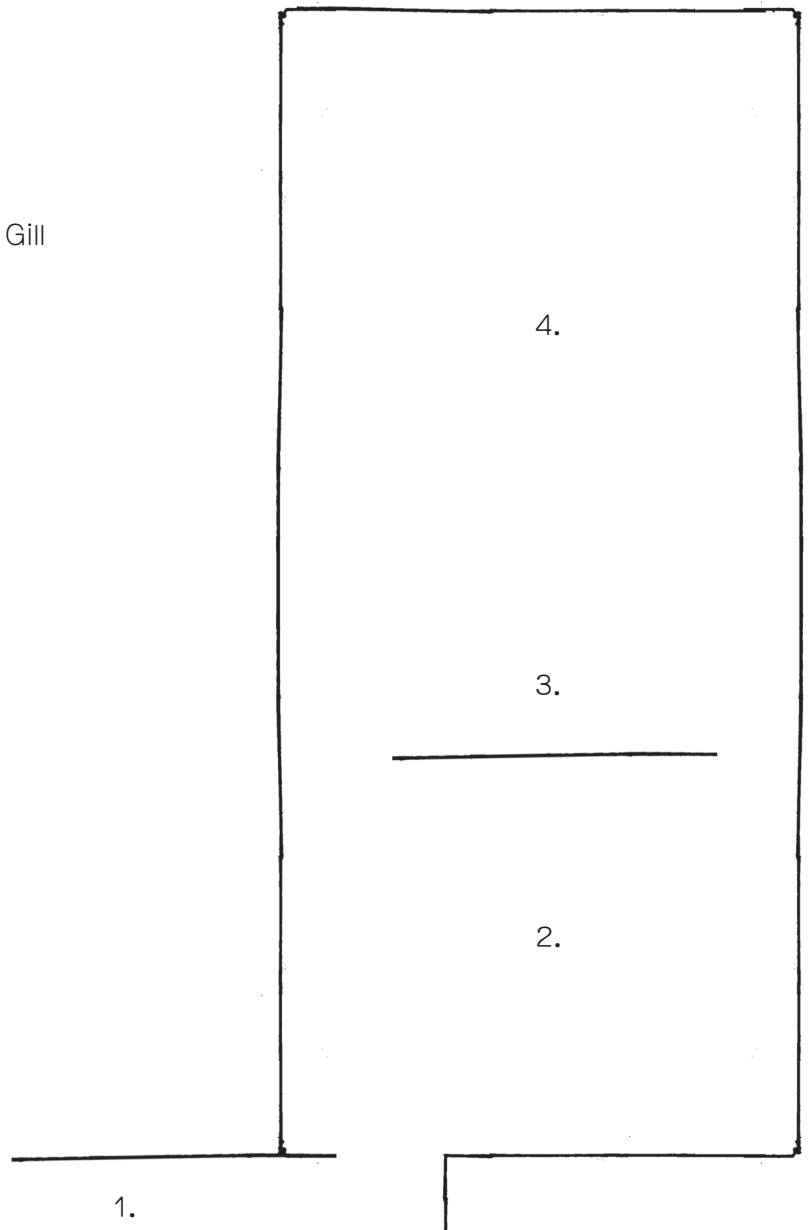
She is professor emerita of gender and women's studies at the University of Arizona, and currently holds a distinguished visiting appointment at Stanford University's Michelle Clayman Institute for Gender Research. She also directs TEN:TACLES Initiative (Transgender Educational Network: Theory in Action for Creativity, Liberation, Empowerment, and Service), which brings humanities-based scholarship into dialogue with transformative cultural practices.

## List of Works

All works by Archie Barry  
and courtesy of the artist.

1. *Second Line Work* (2025)  
4K video  
10 min. 27 sec.  
Camera, lighting, sound: Emmett Aldred, EO Gill  
Hair and makeup: Laila el Rayes  
Audio mixing: Daniel Jenatsch  
Colour grade: Peter Hatzipavlis  
Project assistant: Sean Lowry
2. *Dream for Reed* (2025)  
Two-channel 4K video  
26 min. 9 sec.  
Camera: Rachel Chen  
Sound: Alex Shamku  
Audio mixing: Daniel Jenatsch  
Colour grade: Peter Hatzipavlis  
Project management: Susan Gibb
3. *Water Builds Bridges* (2025)  
Artist's book, risograph print on paper  
20 x 13 cm  
Copyeditor: River Halen  
Designer: Rio Ramintas  
Printer: Moniker Press
4. *Water Builds Bridges* (2025)  
HD video with cushions  
27 min. 17 sec.  
Audio mixing: Daniel Jenatsch  
Colour grade: Peter Hatzipavlis  
Soft sculpture fabrication: Ava Katz

## Floorplan



## Project Team

Curator: Susan Gibb  
Assistant Curator: Kiel Torres  
Graphic Design: Line-Gry Hørup  
Technicians: Devin Chambers, Ben Wilson



Canada



THE AUDAIN FOUNDATION

With support from Creative Australia, the Jim Marks and Norman Macgeorge Travelling Scholarships (University of Melbourne), the Audain Foundation, and the Transgender Archives, University of Victoria.

Western Front acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, Government of Canada, BC Arts Council, Province of British Columbia, and City of Vancouver.