



A BN1 + Lighthouse Commission

# **Susan Collins**

In Conversation

**Site specific installations**

Published by BN1 + Lighthouse

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PO Box 2859  
Brighton  
BN1 1PT  
T +44 0976 303791

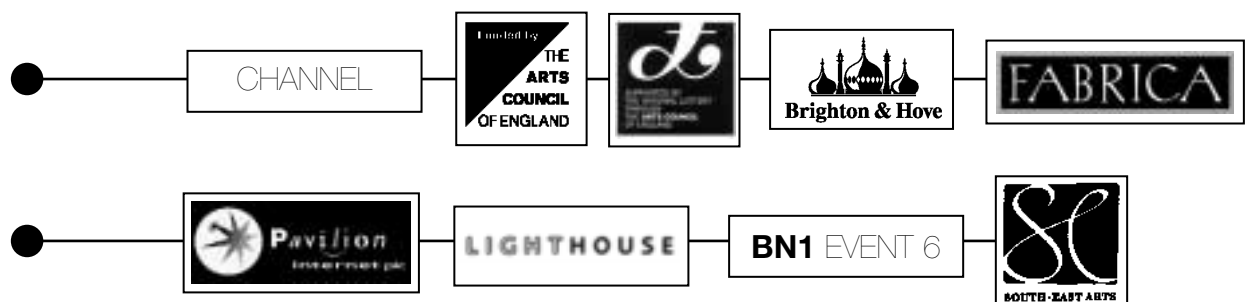
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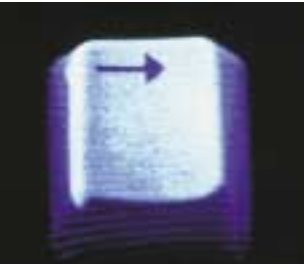
Editor: Bernhard Living @ future-remix.com

Design: David O'Connor +44 01273 623667

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# foreword

This publication, covering the work of the artist Susan Collins, coincides with *In Conversation*, a large-scale interactive intervention that took place both inside and outside of Fabrica, Brighton from 14th November to 13th December 1997. The work interfaced Duke Street in Brighton with the Internet through the use of sound and video projection. This new work was one of eleven Channel commissions, entitled *Inhabiting Metropolis*, which explored the concept of the 'Digital City' ([www.channel.org.uk/metropolis](http://www.channel.org.uk/metropolis)) and was curated and produced by BN1 + Lighthouse.

This project is ideal for the first joint publication between BN1 + Lighthouse. Both organisations have a commitment to access and exploring the creative relationship between technology and artistic practice. As 'a museum without walls' BN1 is committed to the presentation of contemporary artworks outside the conventional spaces of the museum or gallery. Equally, Lighthouse is creating access to technology and digital media through a comprehensive range of training, production, exhibition and development activities.

The locating of *In Conversation* within Fabrica was both apt and appropriate in that Fabrica shares the concerns of both Lighthouse and BN1 to present innovative art works which are within reach to the general public.

One of the unique qualities of digital media is its potential to facilitate true interactivity. This creates the opportunity for work to engage audiences in new ways and broadens the possibilities for wide spread participation and access. Both Lighthouse and BN1 are keen to investigate and explore these issues and retain an open approach to what are still new and ever changing technologies.

Susan Collins' *In Conversation* is an example of how all these ideas can work together within one coherent, innovative and dynamic project.

The artist regards *In Conversation* as a culmination of her series of interactive intervention works concerning human communication in public spaces, the first of which was her interactive sound work for the Woolwich Foot Tunnel in 1993.

Collins works by choice in temporary and often obscure locations, the work is necessarily ephemeral and only 'active' or realised through viewer interaction or choreography.

This publication is the first opportunity to fully catalogue and document these works, providing visual evidence of previous 'interactions'.

Although Susan Collins has exhibited internationally, and is well recognised within the video and new technology field, there is little material as yet publicly available about her work. This publication will place the development of Collins' work within a clear historical context and creates the opportunity to bring her work to a wider public.

Jane Finnis - Lighthouse  
jfinnis@lighthouse.org.uk

Bernhard Living - BN1  
BN1@future-remix.com



## **Suspended disbelief** by *Helen Sloan*

The site-specific work of Susan Collins



*Litter, 1994*

Stroking, fondling, scratching, scrubbing, sneezing, coughing and dripping water are just some of the virtual projections which inhabit the work of Susan Collins. Transgressing art convention, each of the works appeals to the viewer directly to touch or peer at it closely. These pieces suggest real, sometimes tactile objects and events. The works are sometimes funny and nearly always point out the absurdity of everyday situations by their juxtaposition with other unrelated contexts. The history of modern art in itself holds many examples of this kind of grouping of seemingly abstruse objects and contexts. However, the twist in Collins' work is the use of projection. Projected sounds and images have the ability temporarily to transform a space or an object outside of its original context without altering it physically. It is this suspense which is the principal device of Collins' work.



The pieces are essentially a form of virtual reality, but without the cultural baggage associated with VR. There are no supernatural avatars; representations of 3D spaces such as other-worldly alien or spiritual landscapes; virtual art galleries; or walks around celebrity houses. Collins' terrain centres around the everyday encounter; day to day living in the commuter belt or a seaside town; and the chance meetings we have with complete strangers. The work is suggestive and asks the viewer to project their own narrative around each situation. Like still photographs or an incidental but well observed scene in a film, Collins entices the viewer to become immersed in the before and after of the projections. It is about the kinds of situations, familiar to everyone, that provide a combination of amusement and embarrassment. The work is economical, using every aspect of the projection and location whether it is a railway station, foot tunnel under a river, a nightclub or even an art gallery. All these contexts are worked carefully into the viewer's negotiation of the work.

On entering Collins' work (and it is immersive), the viewer's personal space is challenged. The average and comfortable 45cm of empty space around the body when in close proximity with people, and the usual nothing but the most minimal of conversation are immediately thrown into disarray in the work, whether it is by the breaking of the beam of an electronic eye or by using the body as a projection screen. All the implications of the anti-social act are there and a lot of the details, but it does not happen in reality. As a projection is not real, the viewer is asked to substitute their own experience on to the piece which is driven by the viewer as an individual and the work's suggestion. Projections are invested with further mores - we are not supposed to break beams or we interrupt the lecture or performance, and the notion of the body of the audience becoming a projection screen is almost unthinkable; at least, before the introduction of electronic interactive work. All these qualities deepen the immersion of the viewer in the pieces and allow a completely new social space to open up with a new set of rules and regulations. It is permissible to be groped by a projection of a hand and to splash about in a virtual puddle.



*Pedestrian Gestures, 1994*

Every piece constitutes a performance which takes place in a living space, with its own established social rules and context for the people inhabiting it. It is the conflict between the actual space and the space created by the work which facilitates the myths which have grown out of the presence of the pieces. During *Pedestrian Gestures*, when it was shown at Nottingham Railway Station in 1994, delayed passengers became irate as, what they believed to be, the BR tannoy was broadcasting sighs, coughs and groans. And yet at other points, the work punctuated the passengers' day with an intriguing and witty happening. In these contexts, as people become attuned to two part advertising, people try to surmise what it is for. But it is not subliminal advertising - it is an attempt to release the subliminal self in the most impersonal of contexts and spaces. When the piece was shown in a nightclub environment, a "kissing corner" was introduced with the suggestive animations of hands, mouths and eyes together with groans and sighs. *Introductory Exchanges*, in the Woolwich Foot Tunnel underneath the Thames in 1993, had people believing that there were sheep in the tunnel as they tripped an electronic eye connected to a recording of sheep baaing. Others thought they heard footsteps or water dripping in the tunnel. One viewer was so struck by the puddles projected outside the lifts at either end of the tunnel that he relieved himself into one of them.



There are numerous anecdotes around the work and while they are a mixture of negative and positive reactions, the work always achieves what it sets out to do. It draws the viewer's attention to the bathos of everyday situations without making them totally nonsensical. And like these events, the work can only function with a viewer's performative response. The audience becomes a part of the work and their individual reactions can change how a piece is read at any one time. The work is an open system which has to be closed by the audience - the viewer response is therefore crucial to the modus operandi of the system.

In the gallery, the context is still exploited. This is an arena in which many practitioners and theorists suggest that it is no longer possible to be vanguard, but Collins exploits and undermines the shock value which has been invested in so many artworks of the 20th Century. *Touched* for the Landesmuseum, Linz, and Zone Gallery, Newcastle in 1996 and *AudioZone* for V-Topia, Tramway, Glasgow in 1994, invite the viewer to become the projection screen and be stroked, groped and scratched by a projection of a hand. Inversely, sound headsets provocatively encourage the viewer to touch other large projections with strategically placed interactive buttons both from body parts and computers. As with the outdoor work, these pieces give the responsibility back to the viewer for the innuendo and context of the projection. In this way, the work questions the central role of the artist, and the often forgotten one of the audience, in the contemporary art gallery and the institution's place in the history of performance, photography and video.



*Pedestrian Gestures, 1994*



*Every Dog Has its Day*, shown at Warrington Museum and Art Gallery in 1995, put museology under the spotlight by highlighting the process of taxidermy and the subsequent storage of collections. Video coverage of the taxidermy process was hidden in boxes interspersed with objects from the museum collection including a stuffed dog which once belonged, as a live animal in the real world, to a dignitary of the town. Although the work seemed at first humorous, and this is true of all Collins' work, the dog came to signify something more serious. Its exact provenance was unknown suggesting the forgotten histories and heritage held within all museum and gallery collections.

The new work for Brighton's BN1 + Lighthouse, *In Conversation*, is an extension of the devices in former works, and in particular *Pedestrian Gestures*, in that it opens the system between the work and the audience further by using the Internet. A hidden surveillance camera and audio system with microphone on a Brighton street is available for access by anyone with a similar system connected to the Internet or, of course, from the street itself. Using this system together with some visually projected pointers, people in Brighton are able to have dialogue with the Internet users. The Internet is well documented for its projects which create microcosms on a trans-global level and this project is no exception in employing this device. Its difference is that it maintains the intimate level of communication set up between the Internet user and the screen while operating completely outside of the screen at one of its stations. Conversely, it does not operate on the enormous scale of digital performances and installations to date created using the Internet. It maintains the intimacy and suggestion of small scale social interaction which is central to Collins' work.



Puddles and fluids are a recurrent feature of all the pieces including *In Conversation*. These are drawn from Collins' reference to the short story *The Interview* by Primo Levi (1). Elio, a night shift worker, is on his way home from work one evening and as he makes his way down a dark alleyway a voice, which appears to come from the floor, asks him some awkward questions which follow a peculiar logic such as how we digest, wash, gestate and at what age clothes develop on our bodies. Elio feels confusion and embarrassment throughout the encounter, and these feelings overcome any surprise or curiosity he may have when he realises that he is being questioned by a brown alien splodge on the floor. The splodge is in turn left in a predicament when it needs Elio to light a match in order to ionise the air for take off and the return journey home.

What Collins and Levi have in common, beyond the puddle or splodge, is their desire to point out the absurd without making it ridiculous. They do not wish to add to the body of science fiction overrun by twee examples of aliens confused by our habits. Our cultural development, social spaces and interaction are interrogated seriously in Collins' work by the introduction of other arenas and rules which exist in a combination of real and virtual space. Virtual reality and the Internet have suggested potential for other spaces, but they have most often been transposed to computer or headset as a literal attempt to render 3D space, or through the creation of closed systems they represent another environment entirely. Collins remains fixed in a fascination with the real world and uses the virtual to investigate why we act, interact and speak in the way that we do.

(1) Primo Levi trans. Raymond Rosenthal, *The Interview in The Mirror Maker*, Schocken Books, New York, USA, 1989





# in conversation



***www, installation and intervention.***

*www server and site, 2 videoprojectors, PA system, speakers, videomixer, 3 computers, surveillance camera.*

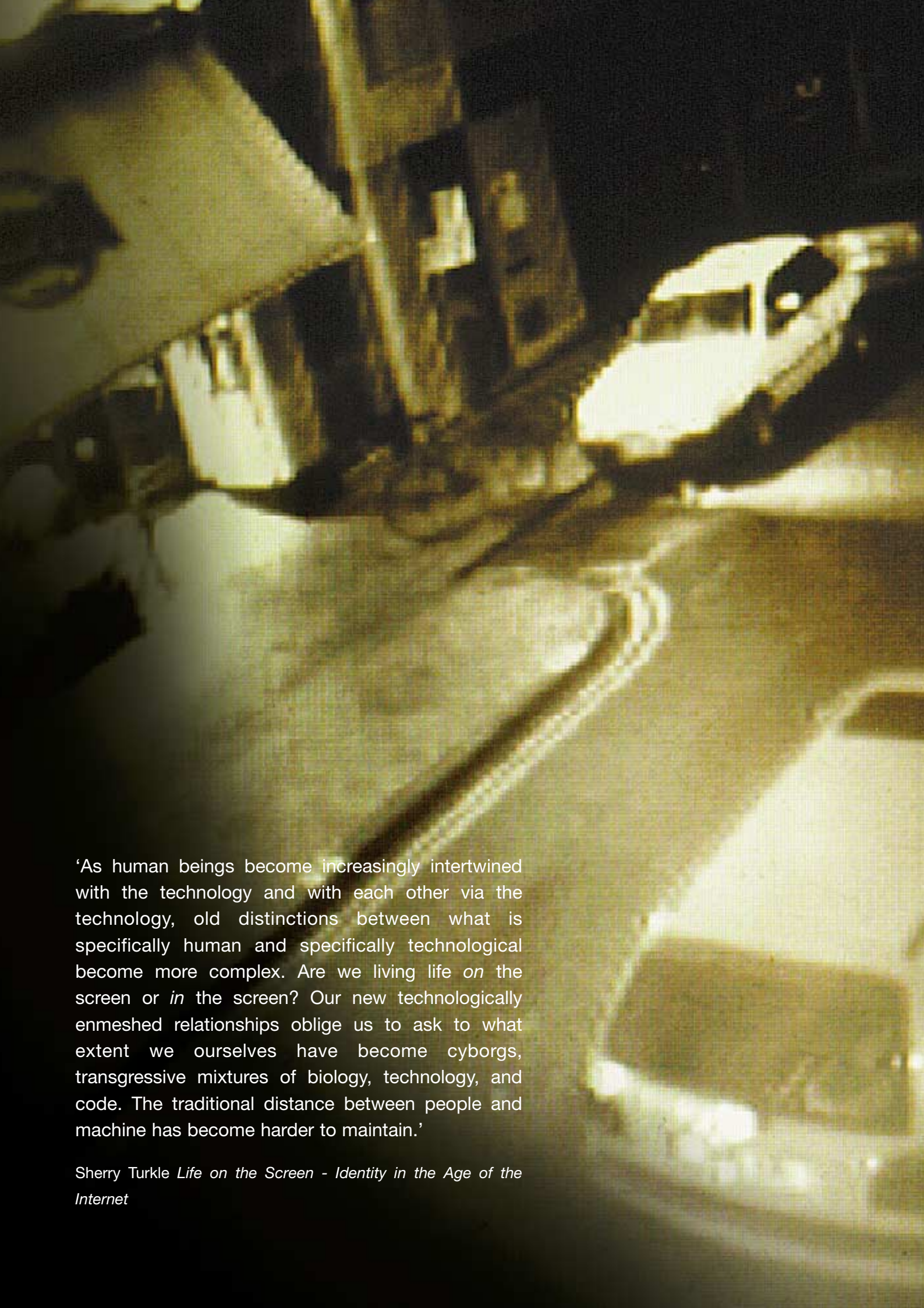
*Commissioned by Channel and BN1 + Lighthouse, 1997.*

*In Conversation* is an installation and intervention, an experiment in interfacing the world wide web with the street. Audio and video projected onto Duke Street in Brighton, is controllable remotely by users of the website both locally and world-wide.

Internet users can see video (surveillance) images, and audio fed back from the street in Brighton, and given the opportunity to strike up conversations with strangers on the street, via this 'virtual' voicebox.

Street participants see images projected onto the pavement, and hear computerised voices and other sounds, without seeing a computer. Microphones pick up the 'real' sounds and voices from the street feeding them back through the net link.

Fabrica, the gallery, hosts a large scale projection of the video surveillance images and amplified sound from the street, creating a sense of hyperreality, a film unfolding in 'real' time.



'As human beings become increasingly intertwined with the technology and with each other via the technology, old distinctions between what is specifically human and specifically technological become more complex. Are we living life *on* the screen or *in* the screen? Our new technologically enmeshed relationships oblige us to ask to what extent we ourselves have become cyborgs, transgressive mixtures of biology, technology, and code. The traditional distance between people and machine has become harder to maintain.'

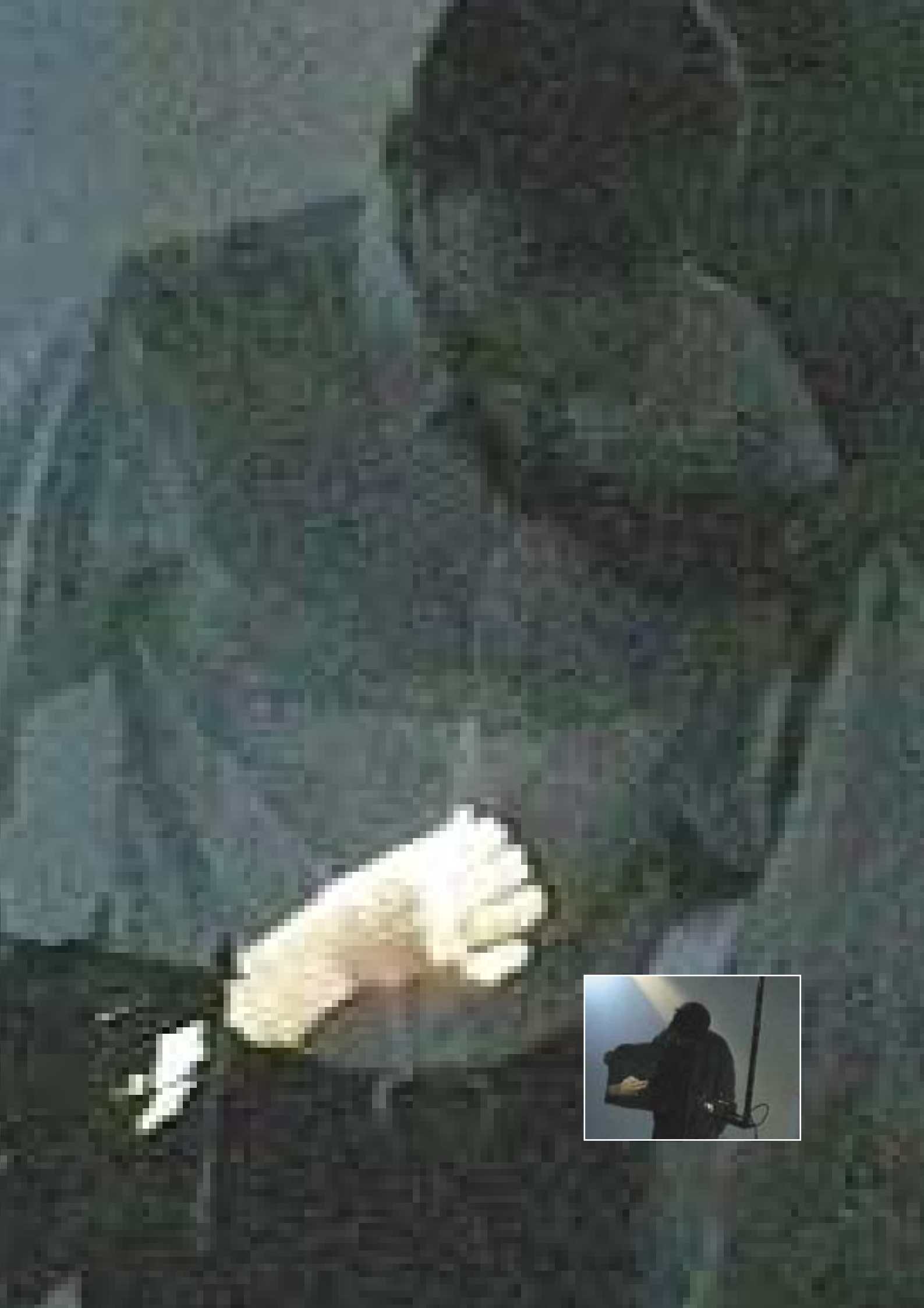
Sherry Turkle *Life on the Screen - Identity in the Age of the Internet*



The idea of the piece is to attempt to introduce these two very different forms of public space to each other; one in which people can be very eager to meet and strike up a conversation with a stranger (the net), the other where people are often very keen to avoid each other (the street). The website hosts a number of ways in which one might strike up a conversation with a complete stranger, and invites visitors to leave more suggestions.

The *In Conversation* website is 'live' for four weeks, building up an archive of social exchanges over this period. The project can be viewed as an experimental exploration into how different environments and means of interaction affect not only our willingness to communicate, but the way and manner in which we do so.

The archive will remain online at [www.inconversation.com](http://www.inconversation.com)





# touched



**Installation**

*5 baby videoprojectors, 5 videoplayers, 5 CD players, speakers.*

*Landesmuseum, Linz, Austria and Zone Gallery, Newcastle.*

*Commissioned by Zone Gallery, Newcastle, 1996.*

As the viewer passes through a corridor, fragile, videoprojected images of hands are caught inadvertently on his or her body... reaching out, touching, caressing, grasping. In each case the body of the viewer becomes both host to, and part of, the image. Sensory audio provides an intimate and constantly moving soundscape, resulting in a suggested (and at times suggestive) narrative.

*Touched* creates the opportunity for one to choreograph an individual progress through the space, with variable experiences setting up alternative readings of the work. Deliberately 'invisible', *Touched* repositions the role of the viewer within the realization and perception of the work.



# audiozone



**3D (virtual) audio and video installation.**

3 computers, 3 videoprojectors, 3 infra-red sensors, 5 CD players, 8 infra-red transmitter/headphones.

Tramway, Glasgow and NAME Gallery, Chicago.

Commissioned by Tramway, Glasgow, 1994.





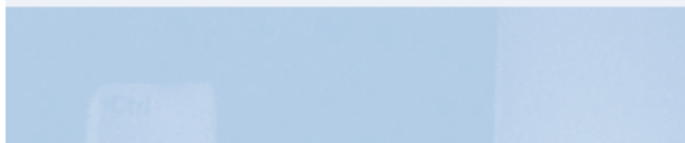
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Sometimes termed “virtual reality audio”, 3D audio is capable of objectifying sound, and giving it a specific spatial location. Working with infra-red cordless headsets, *AudioZone* uses 3D audio to create a parallel world of experience inside viewer’s heads.

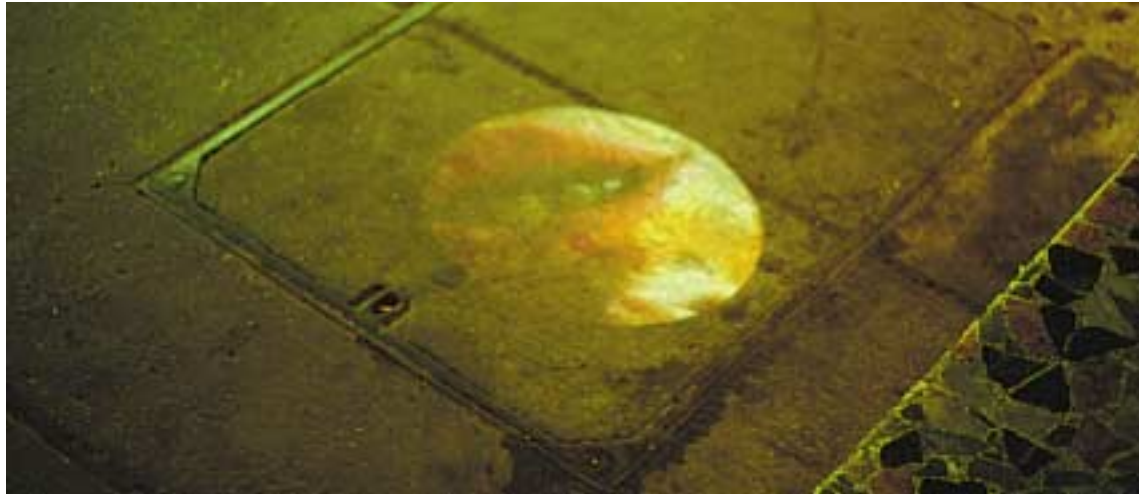
The audio is transmitted from both audio CD and computer sources into specific areas (zones) within the gallery space. When wearing a headset, the viewer encounters an invisible wall of “noise” on entering or exiting these zones, and so can navigate his or her own experience.

The use of 3D audio increases the potential for “suggestion” as a powerful element in the work. *AudioZone* transmits suggested experiences to the viewer. In one zone a viewer may be surrounded by an orchestrated cacophony of voices encouraging him or her to ‘take a seat’, or ‘not to touch there’, while in another a constant breathing will follow the viewer, whichever way he or she turns. Cajoling instructions, sounds and ephemeral video projections combine to seduce the viewer in a captivating experience where the listener is both hunter and hunted and can never quite gain “control”.

The nature of 3D audio is such that the viewer will really feel the audio (i.e. kissing) as an apparently first hand experience, thus creating an audio “trompe l’oeil”, an illusion of a parallel reality.



# pedestrian gestures



***Interactive intervention.***

*3 computers, 3 videoprojectors, speakers, infra-red sensors.*

*Paragon train station, Hull. The Junction, Cambridge. Victoria Station, Manchester.*

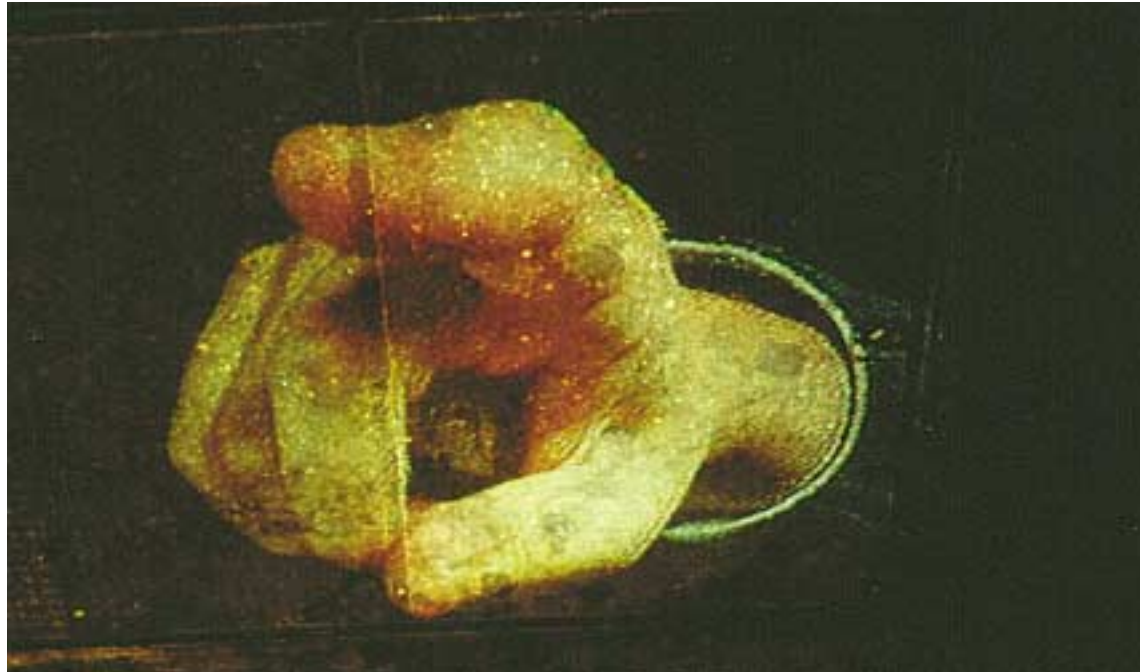
*Nottingham train station. Various sites, Linz, Austria.*

*Commissioned by Hull Time Based Arts, 1994.*

A series of three computer animated, interactive video projection and sound installations in various locations within Hull's Paragon railway station. Evolved from ideas developed while working on *Introductory Exchanges*, *Pedestrian Gestures* is also based on interpersonal communications in public spaces (and the lack of it), with the images and sounds seeking to question and explore aspects of our often unconscious daily exchanges with both strangers and our surroundings.





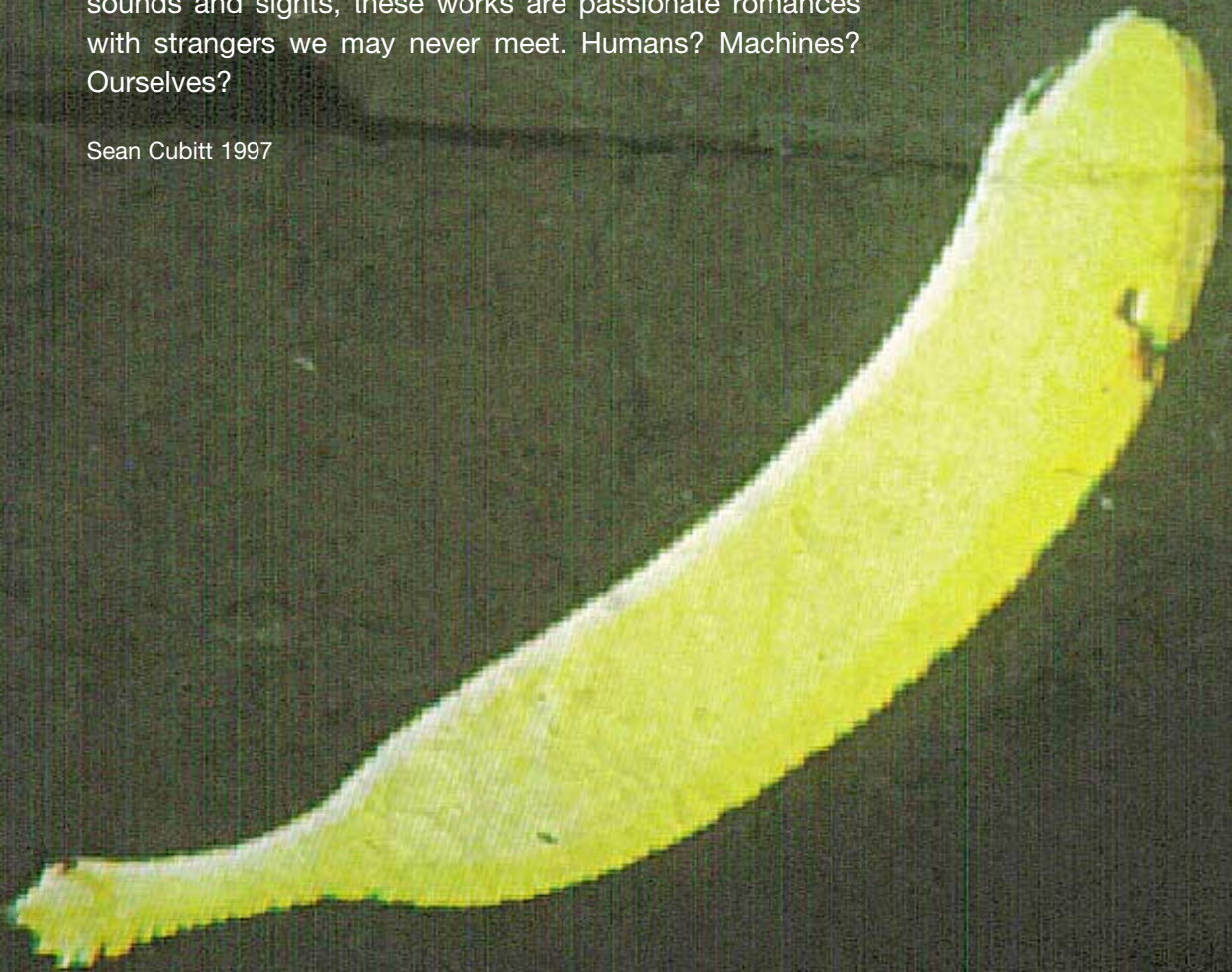


The piece is made up of a number of encounters, intimate in both nature and scale. Animated eyes, mouths, hands and verbal utterances examine the gesture as a form of communication. Viewers encounter short photographic and audio snippets as unexpected moments in their day, inadvertently choreographing their own experience of the work with the sensors triggering a variety of audio and animated responses. Surveillance in reverse.

They wait for you at every corner, those furious images, those blazing colours. But what if the world was full of sound, and sounds were as intimate and shameless as advertising?

Susan Collins has made her own the intimate and unsettling dimension of hearing. An invisible tongue licks your ear, footsteps echo in empty passageways. A voice insinuates itself into your consciousness, and then, and only then, a splash of light, an image, the colour of a memory. Because they look at the small things, unafraid of sensuousness, sounds and sights, these works are passionate romances with strangers we may never meet. Humans? Machines? Ourselves?

Sean Cubitt 1997



# litter

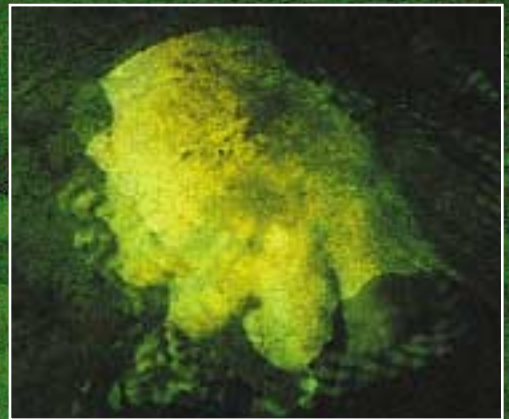
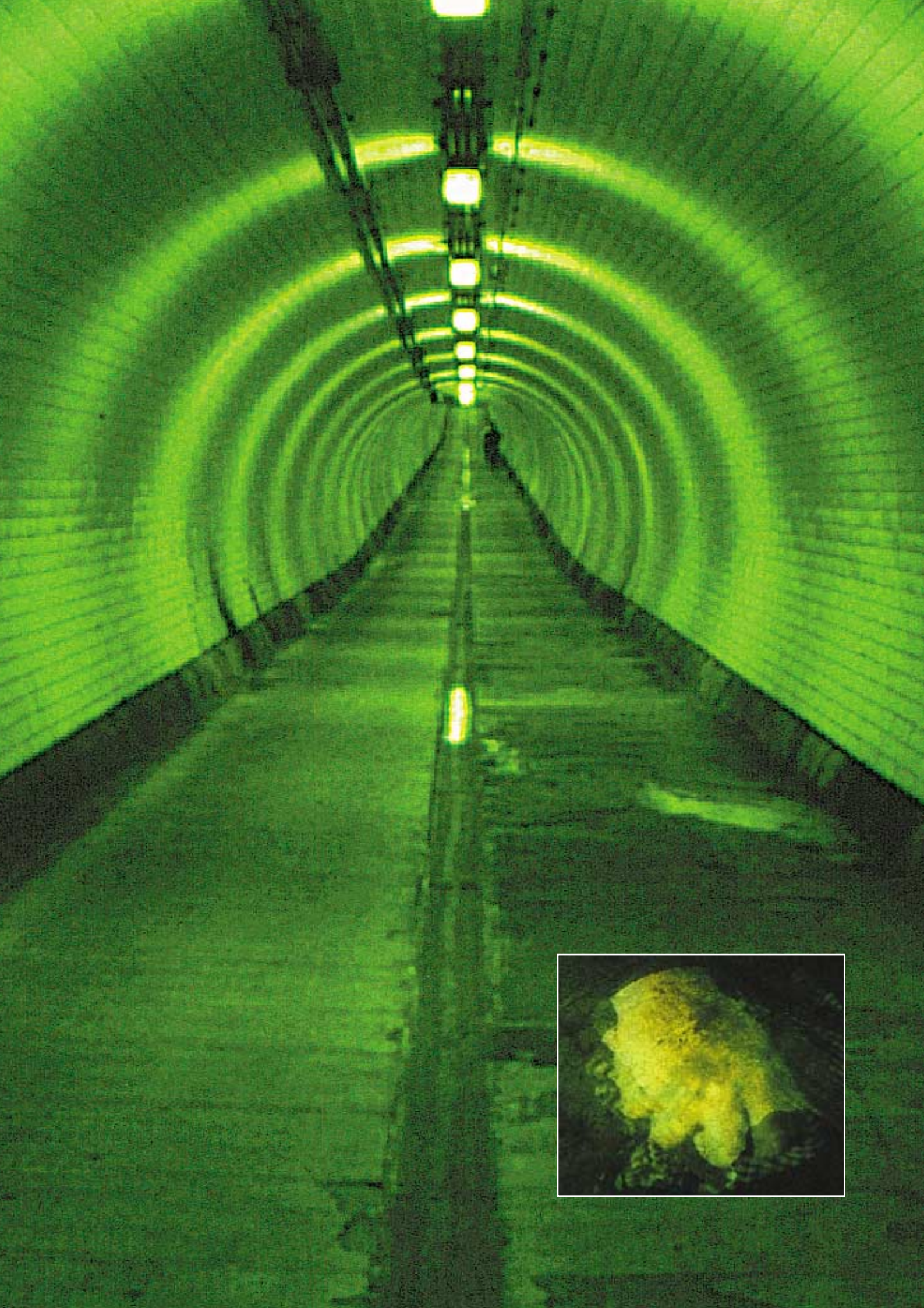


**Intervention.**

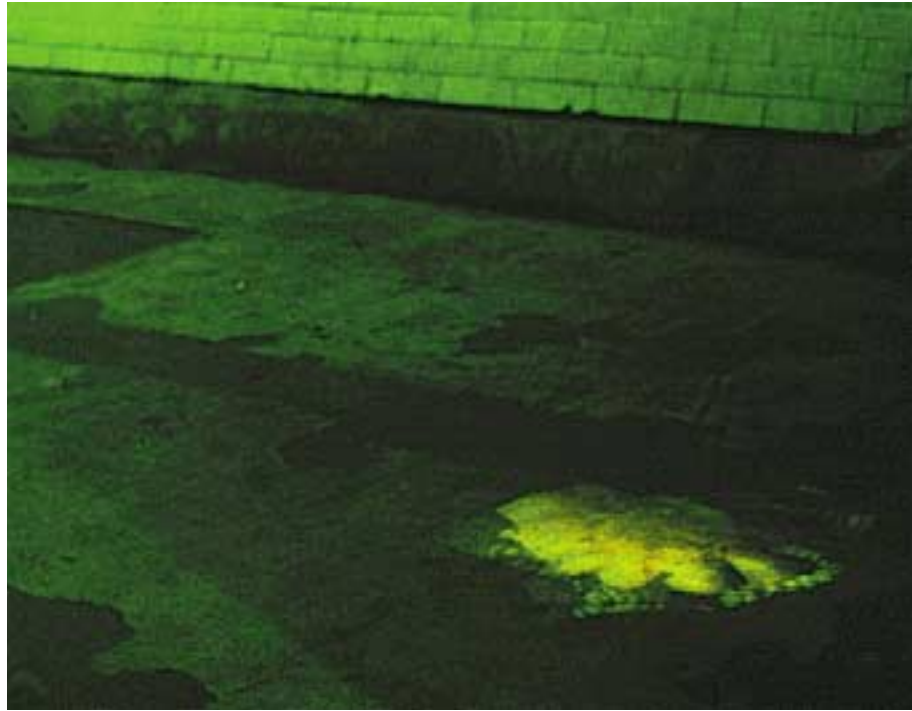
*1 computer, 1 videoprojector, 1 walkman, speaker and infra-red sensor.*

*Wood Street, Liverpool. Commissioned by Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, 1994.*

Animated “trompe l’oeil” projected straight from the computer onto the pavement of a grate, which over time performed a variety of movements, from snapping its “teeth” to morphing into a rolling coin. On occasion the image changed to a bouncing banana which peeled itself.



# introductory exchanges



***Intervention.***

*2 video players, 2 videoprojectors, 8 walkmans and baby speakers, 8 infra-red sensors.  
Woolwich Foot Tunnel, London.  
Commissioned by Camerawork Gallery, London, 1993.*

Originally inspired by human behavioural patterns in public, and exchange and lack of exchange between strangers, *Introductory Exchanges* involved the viewers as active ingredients to both the making and the perception of the work itself.

The piece consisted of a series of sensor controlled sound devices placed at intervals along the Woolwich Foot Tunnel, London (a 3/4 mile long tunnel which links North and South Woolwich under the Thames). The sounds were triggered by viewers passing through the space and included running water, sheep baaing, footsteps, and audible sighs.

There were also videoprojected “puddles” to be stepped over and/or around as passers-by entered or exited the lifts at either end. Every so often an animated hand “scrubbed” the video puddle and brought in a new image.

# biography



Still, 1997

## Education

- 1990-91 The School of the Art Institute of Chicago
- 1983-87 Slade School of Fine Art
- 1982-83 Chelsea School of Art

## Awards, Fellowships and Grants

- 1997 London Arts Board Awards to Individual Artists
- 1996 European Artists Pepinière (Köln)
- 1996 British Council Visual Arts Grants for exhibitions in Chicago and Linz
- 1995 Arts Council/Channel 4 Hi-Tech Fund award
- 1992 National Endowment of the Arts, Regional Artists Project Award, RSG, Chicago
- 1990 Fulbright Travel Award.
- 1989 American Association of University Women International Fellowship
- 1989 Greater London Arts, Artists Individual Production Grant.

## Selected Exhibitions

- 1997 *"Suspect Devices"*, Solo Show, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle co-commissioned by Film and Video umbrella  
*"Imaginary Places"*, Ikon Gallery touring show
- 1996 *"Ex Machina"*, Zone Gallery, Newcastle.  
*"Triplicate"*, Southampton City Art Gallery; Towner Gallery, Eastbourne; Tate Gallery, St Ives.  
*"Objekt:Video"*, Landesmuseum, Linz, Austria.  
*"Command, Shift, CTRL"*, NAME Gallery, Chicago.
- 1995 *"Every Dog Has Its Day"*, Solo show, Warrington Museum and Art Gallery for Videopositive 95.
- 1994 *"V-Topia"*, Tramway, Glasgow.  
*"Pedestrian Gestures"*, Paragon Station Hull and tour.  
*"On Location"*, Bluecoat Gallery Liverpool.
- 1993 *"Handle With Care"*, Solo show, Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester.  
*"Introductory Exchanges"*, Woolwich Foot Tunnel, for *"River Crossings"*
- 1992 *"Wonne/Bliss"*, Shöneberg, Berlin, Germany.  
*"Computer Art: Pushing The Boundaries"*, State of Illinois Art Gallery, Chicago.
- 1991 *"Luz Elástica"*, Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.



Contained III, 1996

### Selected Catalogues

- 1997 *"Susan Collins - Suspect Devices"*, catalogue, Film and Video Umbrella
- 1996 *"Ex Machina"*, catalogue, Zone Gallery
- 1996 *"Triplicate"*, catalogue, Southampton City Gallery, Tate St Ives, Towner Art Gallery
- 1996 *"Objekt: Video"*, catalogue, ed. Gottfried Hattinger, Landesgalerie, Linz, Austria.
- 1995 *"Videopositive 95"* Catalogue, ed. Lisa Haskel & Lowena Faull, Moviola.
- 1992 *"Computer Art: Pushing The Boundaries"*- catalogue, State of Illinois Art Gallery, Chicago
- 1988 *"Art and Computers"* - catalogue, Cleveland Gallery, Middlesbrough

### Selected Reviews, Publications and Broadcasts

- 1997 *"All Things Bright and Beautiful"*, profile in Mute issue 8, by Pauline Van Mourik Broekman
- 1997 Review of Imaginary Places in Make Sept-Oct 97, by Nicky Hodge
- 1996/7 Review of Triplicate in Art Monthly Dec 96-Jan 97, by John Tozer
- 1996/7 *"I like to be in 3"*, review of Triplicate in Make Dec 96-Jan 97, by Anne Hamlyn
- 1996 Review of Triplicate by Richard Ingleby The Independent 30/11/96
- 1996 Interviewed for West Country Television News for Triplicate, at Tate St Ives 15/11/96
- 1996 *"Electric Passions"*, Channel 4 documentary broadcast 14/11/96
- 1996 Review of Objekt: Video in Noema Art Journal No. 43 by Andreas Stockinger (Austria).
- 1996 *"A Directory of British Film and Video artists"*, ed. David Curtis, the Arts Council of England.
- 1995 July *"Similarities and Dogs"*, review of *"Every Dog Has Its Day"* in Womens Art Magazine.
- 1995 June *"Liverpool: The Video"*, review of Videopositive in Blueprint.
- 1995 May Womens Art Magazine, colour cover.
- 1994 *"Without Walls"*, profile/feature in Design Week 7/10/94.
- 1994 Review of V-topia exhibition in Cyberspace Column, The Observer Magazine 14/8/94.
- 1993 Interview and Review of River Crossings on Kaleidoscope, BBC Radio 4, 26/3/93
- 1993 Jun *"River Crossings"*, review in Hybrid.
- 1993 Feb *"The Exploding Gallery"*, article written by the artist in Creative Camera.
- 1993 Jan *"Susan Collins and Computer Video"*, profile in Videomaker (US) magazine.
- 1992 Oct *"Recent Computer Art in Chicago"*, review in Artpaper
- 1990 July *"Going for Gold"*- review in Videographic by Steven Bode.
- 1989 May *"Redressing the Myth"* written by the artist in Independent Media.



*Contained II*, 1996

# credits



*Telepresence, 1996*

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Andy Murray, ISD Department, University College London

Jon Thomson, The Slade Centre for Electronic Media

Programming for the speech and movie 'triggers' by Andi Freeman

MITES

London Arts Board

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*Pedestrian Gestures*

Mike Stubbs, Rebecca Oliver, Adrian Fogarty, H.M. Collins, D.S. Collins, West Surrey College of Art and Design and all the train stations, curators and technicians involved as it has toured.

*Litter*

Bryan Biggs, West Surrey College of Art and Design

*Introductory Exchanges*

Helen Sloan, St John Walker, West Surrey College of Art and Design