Lorraine Oades, First Contact

James D. Campbell

Dans les internets
Inside the Internet
Number 108, Summer 2016

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/83110ac

See table of contents

Publisher(s)
Revue d’art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN
2368-030X (print)
2368-0318 (digital)

Cite this article
LORRAINE OADES

FIRST CONTACT
There is nothing wrong with your television set. Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We are controlling transmission. If we wish to make it louder, we will bring up the volume. If we wish to make it softer, we will tune it to a whisper. We will control the horizontal. We will control the vertical. We can roll the image, make it blur. We can change the focus to a soft blur or sharpen it to crystal clarity. For the next hour, sit quietly and we will control all that you see and hear. We repeat: there is nothing wrong with your television set. You are about to participate in a great adventure. You are about to experience the awe and mystery which reaches from the inner mind to The Outer Limits.

The Control Voice, prelude to The Outer Limits TV series, 1963

Lorraine Oades’s First Contact video and sound installation collides cold war memories, old sci-fi movies, the 1947 Roswell UFO incident, and the threat of little green men, pinioning us somewhere between nostalgia and present tense exhilaration, between old TV memories and the ubiquitous video game console. Upon entering the exhibition space, the viewer is inducted into the artist’s splendid mind space through a vast video projection of meteorites and castoff 1950s electronics and appliances hurtling through the solar system like the detritus in an outtake from Heavy Metal, the cult 1981 Canadian-American animated science fiction fantasy film. This compelling interactive installation consists of four retro television sets arranged in the black box gallery of the Maison de la culture de Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. The TVs are made of plywood, as is the viewer’s chair—a customized theremin armchair—and wed us to the paraphernalia of classic gaming culture in its early iteration of the gaming console, the virtual reality headset, and optical head-mounted displays like the Google glass. Viewers are invited to take a seat and attempt to control—a slow-learning curve for some—the video and sound by moving their hands over the proximity sensors built into the armrests of the chair. One hand effectively controls sundry video images and sounds, which emanate from the four 1950s-style handmade TV consoles, while the other hand adjusts the direction and speed of the video footage.

Here, the viewer is the surrogate for the Control Voice from the ABC TV series (1963-65), effectively controlling video footage and sound effects based on scenes lifted from classic 1950s flying saucer films and attendant news footage. As we grew more adept at moving our hands over the sensors, we can “bring up the volume... or tune it to a whisper. We [can] control the horizontal. We [can] control the vertical. We can roll the image, make it blur. We can change the focus to a soft blur or sharpen it to crystal clarity.” In other words, Oades allows us to vicariously experience “the awe and mystery which reaches from the inner mind to The Outer Limits.” For those who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, the dyspeptic face of American senator Joseph McCarthy—zealous witch hunter of Communist and sundry left-wing “loyalty risks”—remains a palpable icon of unfettered evil and menace. This image promises wholesale slaughter, as it is seen to threaten the wider cosmos itself by alerting the aliens to the deep-rootedness of human xenophobia and its ever-present and itchy “trigger finger” mentality. The prospect of wholesale annihiulation is put squarely into play. The aliens from that era seem to be saying: “Humans, stop the insanity! Or we’ll stop it for you.” The 1950s is invoked as a dark time in history, the imminent arrival of “little green men” somehow pinioning us somewhere between nostalgia and present tense. The awe and mystery which reaches from the inner mind to The Outer Limits.

The 1950s is invoked as a dark time in history, the threat of global thermonuclear war seemingly a hair’s breadth away and for the gamers and coders of a later generation who are veterans of first-person shooter video games set amidst the alien incursion (Doom and its myriad sequels), First Contact proves instructive, challenging, and endlessly addictive.

James D. Campbell

James D. Campbell is a writer and independent curator based in Montreal. He is the author of several books and catalogues on art and artists and contributes regularly to art periodicals, such as ETC MEDIA, Border Crossing, and Canadian Art.

1 Lorraine Oades’s installation, First Contact, was presented at the Maison de la culture de Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, Montreal, from April 30 to June 12, 2016.
2 The theremin chair was invented by Russian physicist Lev Sergeyevich Termen (Westernised as Léon Theremin) in 1920. It grew out of Soviet government-sponsored research into proximity sensors.