

Lorraine Oades, First Contact

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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 flutter. 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,¹ 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.²

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 flutter. 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 annihilation 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 synonymous with the coordinates of the local fallout shelter all good schoolchildren of that era knew as well as the palms of their own hands, the seeming likelihood of global thermonuclear war breaking out at any given moment, the continuing fear of and indoctrination against the prevailing Red Menace or the international Communist conspiracy, and the perennial bombardment of the American public by anti-Communist propaganda. (“Is your washroom breeding Bolsheviks?” read the text of one Scot Tissue ad of that era, and one Christian Crusade publication bore the title “Communism, Hypnotism and the Beatles.”) *First Contact* revisits the profound tension and unease of that time, the inexorable rise of ever more sophisticated domestic technologies (TV, toaster, vacuum, etc.), and the “dreams that money can buy” in our lives in Canada and the U.S. Endearingly, quirkily, and with real auratic skill, Oades evokes the folklore of that moment. The wonderfully crude execution of her plywood TVs and the quaint footage imported from the early saucer films dovetail to conjure a worthy *divertissement*. The enduring relevance—and resonance—of Oades's project lies in the fact that the saucer films were eclipsed by ever more sophisticated cinematic sequels like *The Thing* (the 1982 and 2011 remakes of the 1951 *Thing from*

Another World) and the 10 seasons of the *X-Files* TV series, among many others. Oades reminds of FBI special agent Fox Mulder's mantra from that series: “I want to believe.” In other words, the alien mythology still lives on inside us like the dark harbinger of a still undetermined future tense.

Oades effortlessly pulls us into her worldview by highlighting the rather primitive production value of the earlier films through her own craft execution and by preserving a sense of accessible making that keeps nostalgia possible. Simultaneously, she offers a critique of humans at war with nature and themselves amidst a progressively darker and dystopian horizon of human life, from McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee to present-day racism and fear of immigrants, as exemplified by the “build-a-wall” mentality so endemic to certain political figures and their herd-like audience in the U.S. Yet while sounding a welcome warning about the dangers of xenophobia by revisiting our recent socio-political past, Oades also constructs an interactive environment that is immersive and highly engaging in its form. The comforting binary ethos of suburban living room and video arcade is like a warm blanket we can curl up in with alacrity. For anyone who grew up in the 1950s and '60s with 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 Sergeevich Termen (Westernised as Léon Theremin) in 1920. It grew out of Soviet government-sponsored research into proximity sensors.

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Lorraine Oades, *First Contact*.
Photo: Guy L'Heureux.



