



Richard Wright
IMAGES, ANIMATIONS, ENGINES
1986—2006

Published to coincide with :

HOW TO TALK TO IMAGES
4th July to 3rd August 2008
HTTP Gallery
Unit A2, Arena Design Centre,
71 Ashfield Rd, London N4 1NY
www.http.uk.net

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Design by Europa

Commissioned by Media Arts Projects and funded by
a grant from Arts Council, England London

Edition 500

Richard Wright
IMAGES, ANIMATIONS, ENGINES
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Front cover image, still from *LMX SPIRAL* 1998
7:53 mins, videotape

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Foreword

BY LAUREN WRIGHT →

HTTP Gallery is pleased to present Richard Wright's first London solo exhibition, *HOW TO TALK TO IMAGES*. The exhibition is the culmination of Wright's residency at HTTP. The primary works in the exhibition, *THE MIMETICON* and *THE INTERNET SPEAKS*, represent several of Wright's long-standing interests: image and text, the artificial, and the Internet as a context for meaning (or its evacuation). Shown alongside a collection of Wright's earlier animated films, the exhibition demonstrates the development of Wright's practice since the early 1990s.

Beginning with his animated film *HELIOCENTRUM*, Wright has explored the spectacle of the Baroque with its artifice and mobility of meaning. In *THE MIMETICON*, Wright considers the excess of the Internet, breaking down the images that we normally search by way of text, through 'keywords', such that they become forms detached from their meanings. Images are searched by their correspondence to other images, themselves composed of text: the search term is a drawing made up of letters from across the history of the alphabet. We read the results as resemblances rather than as illustrations of words.

THE INTERNET SPEAKS examines images on the Internet in a very different way. Using the same database of 40,000 random Internet images searched by the *MIMETICON*, *THE INTERNET SPEAKS* removes the images from all context. We have no way of navigating our way through the images; rather they flash us before us one by one, and all we can do is move backward and forward among them. We struggle to make connections between the images appearing on screen, but every time we begin to make sense, the next image appears and all is lost.

HTTP Gallery in London is a Furtherfield.org project. Furtherfield.org is a platform for the creation, dis-

semination and discussion of work by artists, activists, programmers and thinkers who engage critically with networked technology. Richard Wright's work sits firmly within this context, encouraging us reconsider how we make our way through the mass of information collected and made searchable on the Internet. HTTP Gallery is pleased to present Wright's work, along with this book, produced on the occasion of the exhibition, and featuring an excellent text by Sean Cubitt and an interview between Charlie Gere and the artist.

Lauren A Wright
Co-curator HTTP Gallery

Richard Wright's Mimeticism

BY SEAN CUBITT →

The Baroque was always a technique of power, but one that failed because of its attempt at totality. The parallel with Google is not entirely clear yet: it too attempts totality, but unlike the Counter-Reformation, it is not clear whether it is in pursuit of power, or of something else. 'Do no evil' is a slogan equally applicable to enlightened entrepreneurship and the Jesuits, though perhaps the reverse: an application of 'Ad Maiorem dei Gloriam' (For the Glory of God) to software might rankle a little in Silicon Valley.

Yet there it is: the ambition, from Ted Nelson's Xanadu to Google Images, to order the totality of human knowledge. One gapes in awe, as under the false dome of Pozzi's Church of San Ignazio, where the earth opens to heaven and the sainted founder of the Society of Jesus ascends into the empyrean in forced perspective. Ignatius of Loyola's missionaries gathered the imagination of the world as well as its riches in Rome, and founded, if we are to believe some of our media archaeologists, the culture of simulation with one of the Jesuits' greatest and most inventive minds, Atanasius Kirchner, inventor of the magic lantern.

Kirchner's *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* (Great Art of Light and Darkness) was part of a far larger praise of the glory of God in works on China, on cryptology, on fabulous instruments for the making of musical sounds: a cornucopia, a reach out into the world, a system so vast it could never be completed, only intimated.

We look, as the moment of peak oil approaches, at a world in which, according to at least one major report, for the first time since the invention of the Internet, the production of information is beginning to outstrip our capacity to store it. The vast, endless productivity of interchangeable images is integral to this. A picture may or may not be worth a thousand words: it surely takes a thousand times the storage. And the storage has a footprint, in manufacturing, in energy consumption, and in recycling, that is not sustainable. This is one part

of the contradiction of absolute knowledge.

The other concerns the index of the Library of Babel. As the number of items in the library approaches infinity, so too does the size of the catalogue. The more items there are, the more energy it takes to find them. We try our best, devise tools to search better, follow other searchers down the dusty corridors, each scholar knocking aside another spider's web, displacing another cloud of dust. One by one the images swim into view.

Vilém Flusser had a vision of photography: it was, he thought, a vast project on the part of humanity to make every possible image, between the one that is entirely black and the one that is entirely white, with every pixel going through the gamut of available colours till every image has been made. At which point, perhaps, like the old science fiction story, the stars might start to go out, one by one.

Richard Wright's *MIMETICON* is a cure for this terrible impasse. This smart program deciphers shapes. The sad truth is that we have forgotten that the alphabet is a visual code, just like images, only more so. The only difference, as Flusser also noted, is that the alphabet is made of little lines, while the photograph is made of surfaces. Lines have a tendency to lead somewhere. Surfaces have a tendency to hide things. It is a matter of rediscovering the little lines in images, so that once again they can lead somewhere.

This is the marvellous thing. A cluster of Z's extracted from Trajan's Column and pasted in the bottom left hand corner of *MIMETICON*'s search square calls up, from the semantic depths, a map of the United Kingdom of England and Wales, and next to it the straddled corpulence of a gentleman's groin, his flaccid penis gentle as a sparrow on its nest of pubic hair.

You require a mechanical eye to see the similarity, or wit. The pale pink logo for a greeting card company seems less impressive, but a kind of visual grammar flutters just south of conscious grasp, while the old

alphabetic obsession still tries to decipher some satiric intent, a greeting card of sleeping Bacchus, greetings from Olde Englande.

The machinery is no simpler than the fountains of Trevi, than Kirchner's magic box with which he conjured pagodas from the far side of the unknown world, the secret anatomy of the flea, a leering Mephistopheles. Natural, unnatural, supernatural: the invention of propaganda in the Office for the Propagation of the Faith required the mustering of everything in the service of the Lord, and of the temporal powers of his chosen inheritors among the absolute monarchs of Europe, the Divine Right, the conquest of New Spain.

The Baroque was the invention of modernity. History repeats itself, but it turns out that the first rehearsal was farce. Awash with Spanish gold, the economies of Europe nose-dived into inflation. Rome was the Las Vegas of the 17th century: one yearns to hear Monteverdi as its Elvis. This was the engine of globalisation, this mindless excess, these arches and plumes of repressed sexuality, the intolerable violence visited on stones as much as on the Inca.

The first Baroque skated on the brink of another inflation: the inflation of allegory. Everything meant not only itself, nor even its secret symbolic correspondence with one other thing, but suddenly with chains of symbolisation that no longer limited themselves to the rigid structures of a Dante. The rose was not just the flower of love, or of the female sex, or the mystic rose, but the bloom before decay, the fragrance of opulence, the emblem of pride, the thorn of Christ's crown, the worm in the bud, stained with the blood of the Lamb...and on and on.

Not for Richard Wright such pieties, such divinely inspired raptures. No: lit with the fires of enlightened engineering, he toils in his laboratory to bring forth an engine of science, whose name delves into the ancient past to propose to us once again the word *MIMESIS*. This is

an engine whose task, as it was for the first begetters of the task of telling tales, is to reveal to us the nature and status of reality.

In our equally strange epoch of power removed so far from the people that we can only gaze upward, by the light of our screens, trying to glimpse the lifestyles of the rich and famous, we are introduced through the *MIMETICON* to another marvel. All the bright shards, the glittering beasties, and under them another infinity emerges. Not, this time, the uncapturable meaning of the single emblem, but its dialectical reflection in the mirror of history. There, under it all, opens at our feet the unmistakable void whose vacuum it is that sucks towards it this endless flow of indistinguishable logos, maps, diagrams, family snapshots, blackmail and porn, an emptiness St John of the Cross would have been contented with, but which the greatest analyst of these matters sadly chose to christen with the un-ironic, boring and almost unpronounceable name of Commodity Fetishism.

Such is the object of his neo-baroque science. In works dating back to his animations tracing the glory of the Sun King and the hypermodernity of Thatcher's electronic revolution in finance markets, Richard Wright has dared to look into the bowels of contemporary reality and discovered there the chilling end of the old baroque's chains of meaning. Though they stretched the lines between God and his suffering servants to breaking point, they did maintain some kind of absurd hope: the absurdity that through inquisition and conquest, disease and pomp, the glory of God might be served. Today, under smog that dims the sun, it is not God's withdrawal from the world that drives us to build these hieroglyphic basilicas of images and light but the withdrawal of the world from humanity. Dead oceans, burned and flooded lands, fields paved over so long they have forgotten the wind: even our bodies have disappeared under their malleable, surgically-updatable, cosmetic, toned, and,

yes, commodified surfaces.

In the vortex of unspeakable images linked only by the level of tone in the bottom left hand corner, images that cannot be spoken because they are already word-salad, we are introduced to the terminal allegory of the new Baroque.

Here is the beauty of it: the terminus is not inside a human being. Neither you nor I, dear reader, are constrained to be the endpoint of the universal paroxysm. This is software: the code that speaks the language of the new temple and the new priesthoods. We do not need to understand how it works, any more than the illiterate poor of Mexico needed to understand the alphabet or gunpowder, only to feel its might, only to succumb to the gift of faith. Only when we have been so thoroughly implicated in the machinery of vision can we have the crisis of faith to which, at last, this career and this work calls us. And only when we experience that crisis of faith can we be cast out of the Church, and left to scabble among the roots to find what emerges through the cracks in the paving, the germs of another nature waiting to be born.

Sean Cubitt

Melbourne, June 16th 2008

Sean Cubitt is Director of the Program in Media and Communications at the University of Melbourne, Honorary Professor of the University of Dundee and series editor for Leonardo Books. He has published widely on media, media arts and globalisation.

Selected Works and Artists Notes



SUPERANIMISM 1991 with Jason White

I met Jason while we were both Artists in Residence when Paul Brown ran the computer graphics centre at what is now Middlesex University. During the 1980s it was one of the few places in the world where artists could get access to computers. Partly because of this, most 'computer art' at the time was very weak, in fact it was rarely ever finished. So without knowing what we let ourselves in for we embarked on what became a three-year project to produce a computer animated film.

The ungainly mainframe computers at Middlesex were wholly unsuited to artistic production of any kind, and we had to write all our own software from scratch because no one could afford to buy any. I think this was what gave people an 'anything goes' approach: it was such an achievement to get the computer to produce anything at all. This was also the era of 'cyberpunk' when people were trying to loosen up the classic geometries of 'computer art', as though they were putting their computer programs together with safety pins. We were trying to explore every technique we could muster to see what would happen – video footage, 3D graphics, 2D image processing, electronic paint systems. It occurred to us that we were trying to 'super animate' the screen so that became the title. After Paul left Middlesex the centre was taken over by the late John Lansdown who continued to generously support the project during its long incubation.

Honorary Mention, Prix Ars Electronica, Linz
New York Expo, Jury Award, 1995

CORPUS 1992

This was the first commission I ever got and it was to make an installation rather than an animated film. While I had been Artist in Residence at the School of Visual Arts I had shot some video footage of myself and used it to build a sequence that combined different mechanisms like clockwork parts, circuits and a body of flowing water – all different kinds of 'corporeality'.

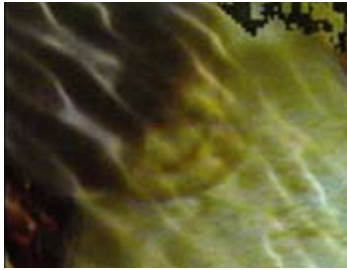
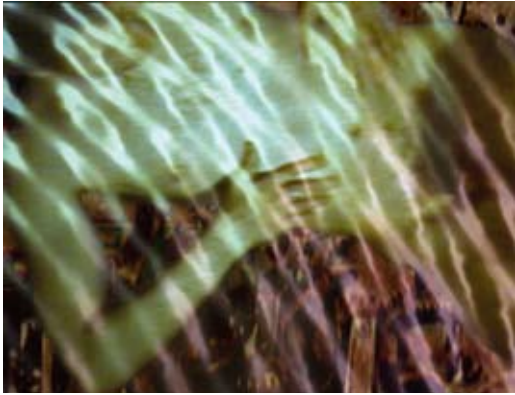
I made my body loop endlessly and twitch like a frog under electrodes. This was quite a common concern at the time – how does the computer reconfigure previous conceptions of the machine, including ourselves? The installation version split the video up into four quarters on different monitors and allowed people to move them around, so that you could take the animated body apart and reassemble it.

I left installation and went back to concentrating on films soon after, only very recently returning to gallery based work.

Video installation commissioned for 'Video Positive 93' by Merseyside Moviola (FACT), Liverpool.

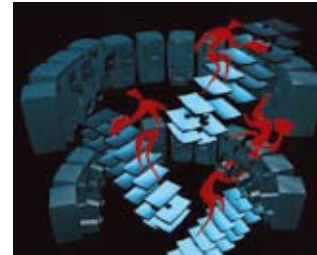
Also exhibited at 'British Artists of the Nineties', Kunstwerke Gallery, Berlin, 1993

CORPUS 1992
6 mins, videotape,
1993 Video and sound installation,
4 monitors and video players

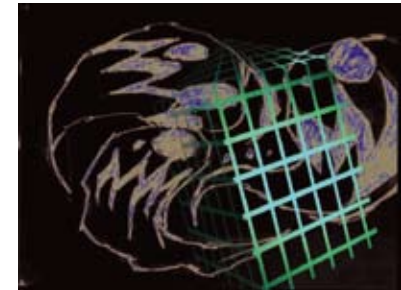


SUPERANIMISM 1991
3:20 mins, videotape

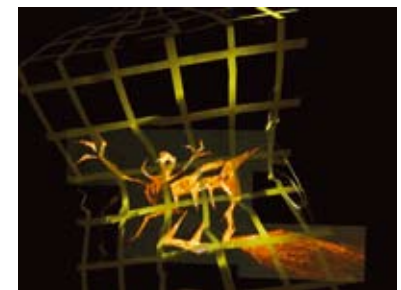
HELIOCENTRUM 1995
with Jason White
11:15 mins, videotape



GRIDLOCK 1996
with Martyn Pick
1:32 mins, videotape,
and interactive animation version



PLAY TO WIN 1997
with Martyn Pick
2:46 mins, videotape,
and interactive television programme



HELIOCENTRUM 1995
with Jason White

HELIOCENTRUM was the first work where I felt I'd actually made an artistic statement. Up to this point I didn't feel like I understood what computer animation was. And it all came about after I'd spent a year studying Seventeenth Century history.

In the early 1990s all the talk was about Virtual Reality and there was this bizarre feeling that this medium would be so unprecedented in its power that previous categories of artistic meaning just wouldn't apply. So we decided to find a precedent in one of the first artificial environments – Louis XIV's palace at Versailles – and look at how he used it to maintain political power through spectacle. This was when Margaret Thatcher's regime was still fresh in people's minds and we incorporated recent events such as the Poll Tax riots in London and the growth of surveillance systems in the UK.

Writer Hari Kunzru referred to it as 'an amazingly effective way of showing how a sovereign manipulated power' although we described it more crassly as 'a cross between a political documentary and a Seventeenth Century rave video'. The film was well received and since then I've often returned to the Baroque period for inspiration, being drawn to both its energy and this transitional historical point when experimental science was practiced alongside alchemy, representational art had not yet replaced emblem books and England had the world's first modern revolution.

Commissioned by animate! and funded by Arts Council England and Channel 4 TV

British Animation Awards, nominated for 'Innovative use of New Technologies' 1995

GRIDLOCK 1996
PLAY TO WIN 1997
both with Martyn Pick

I first met animator Martyn Pick at the legendary Hub Club, a monthly networking event where artists, designers and producers would show their work and generally hang out. It proved very effective at getting people working together, and Martyn and I soon embarked on a mission to combine hand animation and computer animation.

In our experiments we tried to keep everything very tactile and spontaneous, like the equivalent of sketching in 3D computer animation. Everything was constructed out of short sequences of conflict and desire and psycho mania. I learnt a lot about how animation software normally distracts you from what is actually happening on the screen by insisting that you concentrate on its logical procedures.

These two pieces spurred interactive versions when we got the opportunity to develop them for an artists' commission for early interactive TV. Although as we didn't know anyone with the interactive TV service we never got to see our work in that form!

Play to Win commissioned by London Film and Video Development Agency (Film London) for the Videotron system (Cable and Wireless)

Gridlock commissioned by Emotional Computing, Arts Council England

LMX SPIRAL 1998

People are still in denial about what they did during Thatcher's 80s. Half the country seemed to be burning money in a frenzy of excess, almost as though they knew they were living on borrowed time. By the 1990s all this self affirmation had been replaced by crashes and a retreat into the lucky draw of the National Lottery.

I tried to make a film that charted the 'psychological history' of this rarely discussed period, telling the commissioning panel that my aim was to 'spread doubt and insecurity'.

The title 'LMX Spiral' stands for 'London Market Excess', which is a term used in the insurance industry to describe how policies are reinsured over and over again, increasing the risk at each turn in the 'spiral'. This was the practice that almost led to Lloyds's collapse at the end of the eighties.

A lot of the film shows an animated spiral growing and becoming more and more unsteady under a gathering storm. I thought of it as a 'conceptual music video', showing how all the cultural icons of the time reflected a change in consciousness – the music, clothes, furniture – going 'from speed to ecstasy'. It proved very hard to get the right costumes and props though. For some reason no one has kept their flecked suits and paisley shirts.

Commissioned by animate! and funded by Arts Council England and Channel 4 TV.

Nominated for the Videokunstpreis at ZKM Karlsruhe, Germany

For a full list of cast and crew see www.futurenatural.net/projects.html#lmx

THE BANK OF TIME 2001

This project was originally an idea for how to make an animation over the Internet by downloading it one frame at a time. A screensaver was the most obvious way of doing this and then the piece suddenly became about our experience of time on the computer, through its tendency to turn every moment into some form of work, even our 'idle time'.

THE BANK OF TIME visualises people's idle time by growing plants on their desktops, downloading time lapse photos of plants as their time accumulates. To produce it took two years and four thousand photographs of sunflowers, corn, tulips, crocuses and a cannabis plant. They had to cover the entire life cycle from seedling to withering away. While the plant is growing, the screensaver keeps a record of the person's idle time and displays it on the web page so everyone can see who is wasting the most time. But the underlying point was to use the plant growth to gain a sense of the passage of time, outside of the illusion that you must spend every spare second of your life engaged in some profitable activity.

I see it as a vanitas piece, transforming our desktop commotion into cycles of growth and decay. Whether we work or not, nature continues to mark time.

The Bank of Time nominated for BAFTA Awards, Interactive Art category 2001

Funded by a grant from New Media Projects, Arts Council England

www.thebankoftime.com



THE BANK OF TIME 2001
Online screensaver and web site



LMX SPIRAL 1998
7:53 mins, videotape



FOREPLAY 2004
17:14 mins, digital video



There are two dominant forms of realism in the world today – Hollywood narrative cinema and porn. No one ever discusses porn culture or aesthetics, only critiques its social effects. But how can something so pervasive not have a significant cultural function?

In this project I tried to analyse the formal qualities of typical commercial blue movies in terms of one of my favourite motifs – the vanitas form. Influenced by works such as *THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE* and *LA RONDE*, I constructed a film in which a cast of four typical porn characters are always interrupted just before they can get going. The repetitive structure forces them through a series of endless frustrating encounters as they start to age and die, as though these scenarios circumscribe their whole lives.

I described it as ‘a porn film without the sex’, or more precisely as ‘an allegory for a society that traps its members in a merry-go-round of constantly deferred pleasures’.

It was an extremely difficult film to make, involving lots of makeup effects and props as well as digital effects on a miniscule budget. I think it aged me about 10 years.

Funded by Small Grants in the Creative Arts, Arts and Humanities Research Board, with additional funding from National Film and Television School and London Metropolitan University

For a full list of cast and crew see www.futurenatural.net/projects.html#foreplay

No one is sure how many images there are on the Internet. Google has nearly a billion. Some say it is hundreds of times more than that.

How do we find our way through a world of images that is so overwhelming that the dominant mode is to ‘search’ rather than to ‘see’? In *THE MIMETICON* I tried to understand this by constructing an Internet search engine which placed this whole development within the history of visual language.

After studying the evolution of the Western Roman alphabet I was struck by the continuity that existed from its origins in Egyptian pictograms to the supposedly abstract modern letter symbols we use today. I wanted to build an image search engine that allowed you to search for images by visual similarity rather than by typing in keywords. So I decided to make an interface where you had to draw the search image using letters from the history of the alphabet. Image recognition became a way to show how mimesis could organise all visual objects including written signs.

I called it a ‘Baroque search engine’ because of the way that Baroque ornamental alphabets already combined figures, decorative abstract designs and letters in one artform. I also discovered the political history of the alphabet, shaped by the struggles of different peoples to find their own way of speaking or to deny it to others. I eventually put all this material into a separate poster project – *HOW TO TALK TO IMAGES*.

Technical assistance: Tony Shaper and the MediaShed
Funded by a grant from New Media Projects, Arts Council England.

www.mimeticon.net

If the Internet has a language then it would most likely be in terms of the largest type of data it contains – which is imagery. After I had finished *THE MIMETICON* I was left with a huge database of images and wondered what else I could do with them. While aimlessly stepping through them one day I realised that I didn’t have to do anything – the sheer unexpectedness of practically limitless random images, displayed out of their intended context, was so startling that I realised that here was a way of encountering images that had never been possible until now.

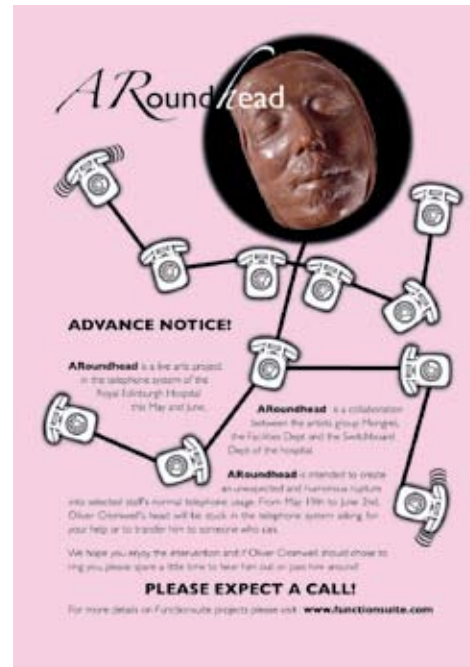
It was also the perfect counterpoint to the highly structured interface of *THE MIMETICON*, which drew on the chequered history of how visual objects had evolved into complex languages such as writing and which were now about to enter a new stage. By limiting us to a completely manual search, *THE INTERNET SPEAKS* emphasises how the images on the Internet are all so different in terms of their visual languages, yet ‘The Mimeticon’ has no trouble in processing them using the same recognition techniques.

After this I decided to exhibit both these works as a pair under the joint title *HOW TO TALK TO IMAGES*. I also did an animated version of this particular piece called *10,000 COPYRIGHTED IMAGES*.

www.internetspeaks.net



THE MIMETICON 2006
Web application and interactive installation



A ROUNDHEAD 2005
Mongrel
Telephone network

TELEPHONE TROTTOIRE 2006 & 2008
Mongrel (with Nostalgie Ya Mboka)
Telephone network

Telephone Trottoire

Bana mboka soki bolingi koyeba nionso ezali koleka na kati ya communaute congolaise awa na poto pe mokili mobimba contacter telephone trottoire po numero ya telephone na yo ekota na liste.

Telephone trottoire yango ezali nini ?



Telephone Trottoire ezali project ya Londres Na Biso (Emission ya radio ResonanceFM) soki oyoki telephone na yo eledi yamba yango okoyoka ba polemiques, ba information, masolo, makambo nyonso ezali koleka na communaute na biso awa na poto, na kinshasa pe mokili mobimba. Ekopesa yo ba information ya sure, ndenge kaka Radio Trottoire esalaka na mboka.

Sima ya koyoka lisolo, to pe information okosala nini ?

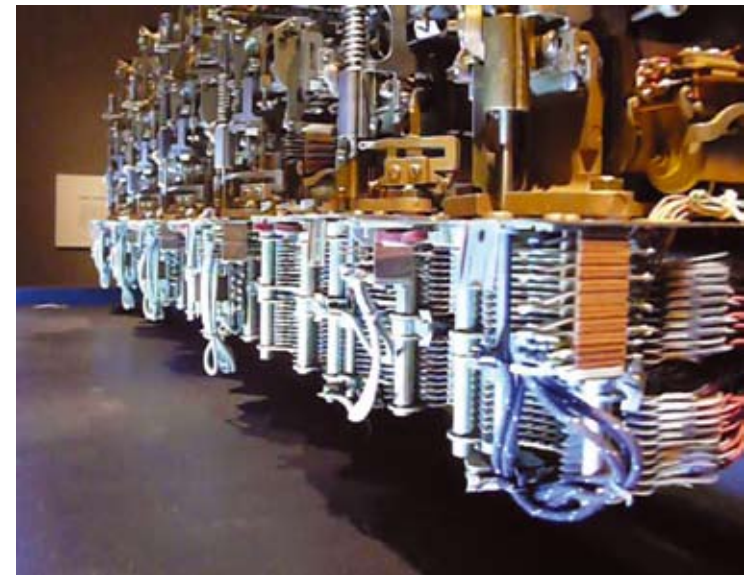
Tango oyoki lisolo okoki kotia commentaire na yo to pe okoki ko passer yango epai ya ndeko mosusu apesa commentaire na ye. Po telephone trottoire ezali kosolola na telephone entre biso na biso bana mboka. Ezali Vainment important po na biso nyonso bana mboka tozala en contact po na koyeba nyonso ezali koleka na mokili.

Po na nini ko participer na telephone trottoire ?

Tosengi na bino nyonso bo participer na telephone trottoire kotikala sima te oyo ezali masolo ya biso nyonso bana mboka il faut kozala a la page. Koyeba nini ezali koleka na kati ya ba communité Congolaise, ndenge balobaka union fait la force masolo ya batu ebele ezalaka malamumu mingi pe na force mingi, echange ya ba idées, avis, opinions, commentaires entre biso na biso ezali malamumu mingi po na mboka na biso.

Ndenge nini na koki ko participer na telephone trottoire ?

Soki olingi telephone na yo ekota na liste ya telephone trottoire telephoner numero oyo : 01702 463605 pona enregistrement



TANTALUM MEMORIAL - RECONSTRUCTION 2008
Harwood, Wright, Yokokoji
Electromechanical switches, computer controller, LCD screen.

These are three of the projects that I was involved with when working with Graham Harwood and Matsuko Yokokoji, firstly as part of the Mongrel collective and The MediaShed. They are all telephony-based works, and although I had never expected to be working in this area, I found I could make a certain contribution.

www.mongrel.org.uk/telephony

A ROUNDHEAD 2005 Mongrel

This was a project with the staff of the Royal Edinburgh Psychiatric Hospital to use their internal telephone system for something more interesting than just administrative tasks. The theme was ‘the head of Oliver Cromwell trapped in the telephone system of a psychiatric hospital’. I developed a technique that allowed people to pass phone calls to each other. We had a pre-recorded Cromwell character auto-dialling people and encouraging them to pass around songs, jokes, farts or hysterical warnings. The reactions were instructive.

Commissioned by ARTLINK, Glasgow for the Functionsuite scheme

TELEPHONE TROTTOIRE 2006 Mongrel with Nostalgie Ya Mboka

We decided to run our next project for the Congolese refugees in London who are all avid mobile phone users. Congolese people already have a practice of passing messages on street corners to avoid state censorship that they call ‘radio trottoire’ (‘pavement radio’) so we decided to build on that. I worked with Vince and Koffi of the

radio programme *NOSTALGIE YA MBOKA* who wrote the audio stories to be played and passed around. The project was extremely popular. In six weeks we amassed 450 recorded comments and the number of users increased six fold.

Funded by Art Council England London. Launched to coincide with the NODE. London season of media arts, 2006

TANTALUM MEMORIAL – RECONSTRUCTION 2008 Harwood, Wright, Yokokoji

One problem we had was how to communicate our telephony projects to audiences outside of their immediate users. So when we got a commission for the Zero festival we decided to connect it to a very visible object in the gallery. We found a set of old Strowger electromagnetic telephony switches and had them reconstructed so that every time *TELEPHONE TROTTOIRE* dialled a number it animated the switches. We called the work *TANTALUM MEMORIAL* for the victims of the ‘coltan wars’ in the Congo, the war over the source of tantalum metal that is used to make mobile phones and that has led to the deaths of 3.9 million Africans since 1998. This event has also suffered from a distinct lack of visibility despite being at the root of the current surge in global communications.

The work has been well received and now we are doing versions of this for the Science Museum, London and Manifesta7 in Bolzano, Italy.

A FUSE Commissioned Residency for the 2nd Biennial o1SJ Global Festival of Art on the Edge, ZERO1, CADRE Laboratory and the Lucas Artists Program, Montalvo Arts Center.

www.mediashed.org/TantalumMemorial

Interview: Charlie Gere and Richard Wright

JUNE 16TH – 20TH, 2008

→

Q

You have been making art using computers for over twenty years now. *CELLS*, your first digital art work dates back to 1986, made while you were still at Winchester School of Art. What do you think about the abstract nature of the work you did then?

A

In those early works I think I was trying like many computer artists to find a way of making images which was outside of myself. I was on the painting course at Winchester and enjoyed doing that but could never decide what kind of painter I was – was I a lyrical abstractionist or a new figurative painter or an op artist? There were all these different kinds of imagery but I wondered if there was some way of getting behind them all, getting at some level of image making that had less baggage, which contained all these potentialities so I didn't have to choose. Experimenting with constructivism and mathematical systems was a way of getting a more objective look at all the forms of images that humans produce as well as those that occur in nature. Was there some common formative process? It was as though I wanted to possess all images by making them inside my computer. Using computers was a way of finding another place to stand, so like Archimedes I could move the world.

But it was finally a dead end, in those terms. I realised that the level of abstraction you get in what we would now call 'generative art' is always in danger of disconnecting from other levels of reality. It becomes a fantasy, an escape. The trick is to try to see how it drives those other levels of reality in a way that connects it with human experience. This is even more the issue today I think, because nowadays the algorithmic constructions that we used to make pictures with are now driving things like financial systems, law enforcement, performance indicators or university staff assessments.

How can we gain a purchase on the abstract systems that have been implemented to run society without resorting to some romanticism? It's as though we now need a place to stand which is as far from computers as they were from what went before yet without abandoning them.

I remember being blown away when I first saw *SUPERANIMISM*, the animation you made with in 1991 with Jason White at Middlesex. I was on the course there just after you, and like most of the students, still very caught up with randomness, automata, geometry and abstraction. Your animation seemed like a whole different way of thinking about what computer art might be like. Tell me about making a work of that complexity.

I think we were trying to put together everything we'd learnt about computer generated imagery and distil it into one work. What is it that links together 3D modelling, synthetic textures, procedural graphics, digital video? Animation is classically described as 'the illusion of life' yet after working with, I think, such 'fertile' methods of making imagery as those using computer software it felt as though it was now much more than an illusion. It felt as though it was 'super animated'.

I think that was a transitional period in the history of the medium when despite the fact that you could now move between making fairly realistic pictures or abstract mathematical graphics, the computers themselves were still so frustrating to use. You still had to write all your own software and time share on mainframe computers. I remember sitting with Jason watching the screen of the only colour framestore in the art department, generating a single frame of our animation line by line, each line moving across the screen at about the rate of a spider being chased around

a bath. In hindsight you can see that was a time when you had a new culture straining to escape the confines of the previous one. Now I'm old enough to have seen many of these transitions – virtual reality, the Internet, mobile media. But it's these transitional points which are often the most interesting, when you still have artists and computer scientists having to work together yet now having just about enough freedom where they can start to do more of their own thing. It's possible to get a mutual perspective.

I remember how after this period the technology quickly reached the stage when we had the opposite problem. As if in reaction to years of rationing, by the early nineties computer graphics had developed a bloated, strident visual aesthetic, cramming as many highly shaded, whizzing polygons into the picture as possible. It was also the time of Virtual Reality and the almost numbing hype that was propagated, that anything was now possible and we would soon be wallowing in 'images beyond imagination'. Instead it had the effect of completely stifling people's imagination.

Might this have been the origin of your interest in the 'Baroque', which runs through much, if not most of your work?

I started studying the history of virtual environments at this time and found myself looking at the Baroque period in general and Louis XIV's Palace of Versailles in particular. I was struck by the parallels between regimes that tried to exercise complete control over what we see. So in our film 'Heliocentrum' we tried to show what it was about computer animation and electronic culture that continued this historical theme and how it had entered a new phase. We tried to pull out aspects of computer animation that could form part of an aesthetic that was Baroque but in a fuller and more self-critical way, not just banging you over the head

with bigger and brighter polygons. There were many Baroque motifs from the Seventeenth century that already looked like they were the result of a kind of inner generative force, like they had been procedurally generated from mathematical formulas. All those spiralling, florid tendrils and ornaments appeared to be stretching out, like animated forms that had been frozen while in full flow.

One technique we developed for the animation was to allow all these 3D forms to intersect with each other, so we had furniture and ornaments and statues passing through each other to emphasise their quality as pure, intangible spectacle. This is a technique that even today you rarely see exploited, because the first thing people are taught when they learn 3D animation software is to make sure that your models don't intersect, even though it is the most natural thing for virtual objects to do.

So this started a wider interest in the Baroque as a precursor for many aspects of electronic culture and of the modern world in general - coding, artifice, decay. More recently I had the opportunity to visit Dresden and see the collections of Augustus the Strong, a Baroque prince who came closest to trying to outdo Louis XIV himself. This was the point where I came closest to understanding the obscenity of the Baroque, its dark side. There was a vast collection of artefacts called The Green Vault where each room was devoted to a single material like amber or rock crystal or silver gilt. Each artist would show their skill by contradicting the properties of each material, so that very hard rock crystal was worked into smooth organic forms of serpents and birds, trying to prove, just like computer modelling, that there were no limits to the visual forms they could generate. The natural properties of things were of no consequence, we can create anything we have a will to. The hubris was truly overpowering. I came away feeling physically sick.

Watching *HELIOCENTRUM*, the animation about Louis XIV, from 1995, I was struck by how complex and intricately crafted it is, and how it combines the photographic with the more abstracted and geometric forms, as a kind of antirealism. Yet this kind of work appears to some extent to be a dead end, in that the use of 3D computer graphics is mostly devoted to realism or even photorealism, whether in animation, games, or special effects for films, while at the same time interactivity, especially in the Web has become such a focus of artists' use of computers. Would you agree and do you think that such an approach might return?

I think this is partly because the short film has become neglected as an experimental medium in digital arts. Up to the mid nineties, up until the Internet in fact, the most innovative work in electronic arts in general would be expressed through the computer animated film as the medium of choice. Then in 1995 Pixar released *TOP STORY*, which I think settled in many people's minds what the aesthetic form of computer animation was; it became a genre. And at the same time there was the rise of the Internet as an artistic medium, and that was partly due to its form as a network and partly to do with its growing popularity. It was the Internet that made the computer a household object. Now if you are an artist, in whatever medium, your work has to have an 'Internet presence'.

Following from that last point your recent works such as, *THE BANK OF TIME* from 2001 and *MIMETICON* from 2006 both represent exactly such a shift away from linear animation towards different kinds of interactivity. Was this shift a response to the increasing ubiquity of the Web, and what do you think it means in terms of more general shifts in the nature of computer art?

The Internet created 'new media art' which legitimated itself through reference to conceptualism and social practices like FLUXUS, rather than to the more unfashionable constructivism, which is closer to the visual arts. So it is now harder to argue for the power of the image. This was particularly an issue with *THE BANK OF TIME* (2001). So briefly, this work is an online screensaver that uses your idle time to grow virtual plants on your desktop. It has two aspects – as it saves your idle time it uploads it to a web site and displays it in a 'league table' so everyone can see who is wasting the most time. That's fun but it's just a number, it's like 'performance indicators', a bureaucratic aesthetic. It also downloads time-lapse photographs of plants so you can see the rate at which your idle time is accumulating. The plants grow all the way through from seedlings to maturity and then fade away and die, it takes about 40 hours of idle time. I think of it as a vanitas piece. It's quite a panorama and it's intended to give people a keener sense of what this passage of time really feels like. How 'investing' your time in all consuming computer activities compares to other forms of time, like the cyclic rhythms in nature; because your investments can go down as well as up. And in fact they have to if life is to continue. 'Peak oil' is the latest factor in this growth myth.

Some critics thought that the emphasis on the plant imagery was unnecessary, that they made it look too attractive. But without the plants it would not have been possible to get across this experience of time passing. It is this perception of unfolding time, of animation in fact, that I think is most missing in current, conceptually driven new media art. Because a concept is essentially static, complete, graspable. But when you are watching a film there's a sense of living in the same temporality as the work.

Since 2004 you have been a member of an artists collective, formerly part of the Mongrel group and now crediting your work as ‘Harwood, Wright, Yokokoji’. What made you decide to make such a move, and what implications do you think it might have for the future direction of your work?

Graham and I had worked together on and off since we organised an artists network in the late eighties called *TERMINAL CULTURE*. I joined Mongrel when I had just started work on what became *THE MIMETICON* and *THE INTERNET SPEAKS* which was going to be a very ambitious multimedia, text and code art work. In fact I think the original idea was to create a whole new operating system based on Baroque alphabets. At the time Mongrel was also involved in quite large scale software development. Graham and Matsuko had just finished building *NINE* (9) which was an artwork in the form of an early experimental social software system. So we pooled our resources and started work on these grandiose projects. But after a while it became clear that software projects of this scale were no longer sustainable. And what was social software had now become Web 2.0 and people came with particular expectations of it. So instead we tried to open things up, not to make the computer itself the focus of everything. I had built a telephony platform for arts projects that helped by making our work accessible through a common telephone and it grew into our ‘social telephony’ series. The other big thing we did at this time was ‘free-media’ – which is like DIY media but with a particular artistic agenda, taking inspiration from the most unlikely or inaccessible materials and resources like kites and CCTVs and showing how they can be used as media systems. We’re currently extending that idea into eco-media.

I think I have pushed new media as far as makes sense for me. Now I have to bring what I’ve learnt back into animation. I think I would call my current work

‘animated media’ – animated but not always in the form of films. So this has helped me to see how digital animation could work in a wider situation, out on the streets or by using ecological mechanisms. For instance, *MASQUERADE* is a new project which as I describe is ‘to turn a public space into a public masquerade’. It takes advantage of the way that public spaces are designed to influence people’s movements so there is always a flow of people in a dominant direction or pattern. This choreographing means that you can use crowd behaviour as an animation tool, picking up their movements through CCTVs using tracking software and using it to animate other graphic elements. I’ve been referring to this approach as *DECORATIVE SURVEILLANCE*. It’s one way that computer programs can be used to show how far people’s behaviour is already programmed by various designed urban spaces. This demonstrates a change in the way that computing has infiltrated daily routines that is far more subtle and penetrating than the days when we were forced to sit and wait for our frames to finish rendering. Now the computers sit and wait for us to trespass or go begging on a railway carriage, or try to use a video camera inside a shopping mall. Computers are no longer entirely outside of ourselves, we are inside them.

Dr Charlie Gere is Head of Department and Reader in New Media Research in the Institute for Cultural Research, Lancaster University, Chair of Computers and the History of Art (CHArt), and was the director of Computer Arts, Contexts, Histories, etc (CACHE), a three-year research project looking at the history of early British computer art. He is the author of *Digital Culture, and Art, Time and Technology* and co-editor of *White Heat Cold Technology*. He is currently working on a book project tentatively entitled *Digital Culture and the Death of God*.

Born

06.09.63 London

Education

- 1998 *DOCTORATE* London Metropolitan University
1987–88 *MA COMPUTING IN DESIGN CASCAAD*, (Lansdown Centre for Electronic Arts) Middlesex University
1983–86 *FINE ART BA* Winchester School of Art
1982–83 *ART FOUNDATION COURSE* St. Martin's School of Art, London

Positions

- 2007 *ARTIST IN RESIDENCE* Furtherfield.org, London
2004–08 *RESEARCH DIRECTOR* Mongrel artists collective
2006 *MEDIA DESIGN RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP* Piet Zwart Institute, Holland
2001–04 *ASSOCIATE RESEARCH FELLOW* London Metropolitan University
2001 *VISITING PROFESSOR* School of Design, University of Western Sydney
Contextual Studies tutor and advisor for animation, University of Westminster
1999–03 *POSTPRODUCTION AND ANIMATION TUTOR* National Film and Television School, UK
1995–98 *RESEARCH ASSISTANT* London Metropolitan University
1996–99 *VISITING PROFESSOR* Video Department, Royal College of Art, Stockholm
1991–2 *ARTIST IN RESIDENCE* School of Visual Arts, New York
1988–95 *LECTURER IN COMPUTER GRAPHICS* (London Guildhall University) London Metropolitan University
1987 *ARTIST IN RESIDENCE CASCAAD* (Lansdown Centre for Electronic Arts), Middlesex University, UK
1986–87 *RESEARCH FELLOW* IBM Scientific Centre, Winchester, UK

Selected Exhibitions And Festivals

- 2008 *HOW TO TALK TO IMAGES* (cat.), HTTP Gallery, London (solo)
2006 *PRIMA MATERIA* New Forms Festival, VIVO, Vancouver
NODE. London, (cat.), London
2004 *EXPERIMENTS IN THE MOVING IMAGE* (cat.), Old Lumiere Cinema, London
OHNE KOHLE INDEPENDENT FILM AND VIDEO FESTIVAL Vienna
2002 *@RT.NET.UK/NOW* British Council Gallery, New Delhi, India
A FAIR PLACE Museum of Contemporary Art, Istanbul, Turkey
2001 *PLEASE DISTURB ME* Great Eastern Hotel, London
2000 *RANDOM SELECTION* (cat.), LUX Gallery, London

- 1999 *VIDEOTRON INTERACTIVE TV* (Cable and Wireless), London (broadcast)
DOPE SHEET Channel 4 TV, UK (broadcast)
TRANSMEDIALE (cat.), Berlin
1998 *SWF3 AND SF DR52 TV* Germany (broadcast)
EUROPEAN MEDIA ART FESTIVAL (cat.), Osnabruck, Germany
INTERNATIONAL ANIMATION FESTIVAL (cat.), Cardiff, UK
PANDEMONIUM FESTIVAL (cat.), London
1997 *DOPE SHEET* Channel 4 TV, UK (broadcast)
HIROSHIMA ANIMATION FESTIVAL (cat.), Japan
LOS ANGELES ANIMATION CELEBRATION USA
1996 *ANTWERP FILM FESTIVAL* (cat.), Antwerp, Belgium
INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF ANIMATED FILM (cat.), Stuttgart
INTERNATIONAL ANIMATION FESTIVAL (cat.), Cardiff, UK
EDINBURGH FILM FESTIVAL (cat.), UK
OSNABRUCK FILM FESTIVAL Germany
1995 *FOURMATIONS* Channel 4 TV, UK (broadcast)
EUROPEAN MEDIA ART FESTIVAL (cat.), Osnabruck, Germany
LONDON FILM FESTIVAL (cat.), London
1993 *VIDEO POSITIVE '93* (cat.), Liverpool
BRITISH ARTISTS OF THE NINETIES (cat.), Kunstwerke Gallery, Berlin
CANAL PLUS TV France (broadcast)
1992 *BERLIN VIDEO FEST* (cat.), Germany
NEW VISIONS, NEW TERRAIN compilation, Film and Video Umbrella, London
COMPUTER WORLDS compilation, Film and Video Umbrella, London
1991 *VIDEO POSITIVE '91* (cat.), Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool
EUROPEAN MEDIA ART FESTIVAL (cat.), Osnabruck, Germany
LONDON FILM FESTIVAL (cat.)
INTERNATIONAL ANIMATION FESTIVAL (cat.), Cardiff, UK
SIGGRAPH '91 ARTSHOW (cat.), Las Vegas, USA
1989 *ELECTRONIC PRINT* (cat.), Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol
1988–9 *ART AND COMPUTERS* (cat.), Cleveland Gallery toured to Utrecht, Aberdeen, Glasgow

Selected Writings By The Artist

- 2008 *FROM SYSTEM TO SOFTWARE: COMPUTER PROGRAMMING AND THE DEATH OF CONSTRUCTIVIST ART* in 'White Heat, Cold Logic', (ed.) by Charlie Gere et al, CACHE, Birkbeck College and MIT Press
'GETTING CLOSER TO BIGGER SCREENS' Metamute (online), March 2008 www.metamute.org/en/Getting-Closer-to-Bigger-Screens
'DATA VISUALISATION' in 'Software Studies', (ed.) by Matthew Fuller, MIT Press

- 2004 *'SOFTWARE ART AFTER PROGRAMMING'* MUTE no.28, London, spring 2004. Pg 46–53
2003 *'WAKING UP FROM CINEMA'* Vertigo, Vol 2 no. 4, spring 2003. pg 28–29
2000 *'PROGRAMMING WITH A PAINTBRUSH: THE LAST INTERACTIVE WORKSTATION'* Filmwaves, no 12, Autumn 2000. pg 44–48
1998 *'NEW MEDIA, OLD TECHNOLOGY'* Readme! Filtered by Nettime, Ed. by Bosma et al, Autonomedia, pg 256–260 and Variant, vol 2, no 6, Autumn 1998
1996 *'MORE POWER: THE PIONEERS OF BRITISH COMPUTER ANIMATION AND THEIR LEGACY'* in 'Diverse Practices: A Critical Reader on British Video Art', ed. by Julia Knight, Arts Council of England and University of Luton
'ART AND SCIENCE IN CHAOS: CONTESTING READINGS OF SCIENTIFIC VISUALISATION' in 'Futurenatural', ed. by Robertson, Mash et al. Routledge, London. Pg 218–236
1995 *'TECHNOLOGY IS THE PEOPLES FRIEND. COMPUTERS, CLASS AND THE NEW CULTURAL POLITICS'* in 'Critical Issues in Electronic Media', ed. by Simon Penny, SUNY. Pg 75–104
1995 *'TOWARDS A POETICS OF KNOWLEDGE'* in 'Digital Salon', ed. by Tim Binkley and Antoinette LaFarge, Leonardo, Vol 28, No. 5. pg 395–398
'ITS JUST LIKE ART: NOTES ON CLASS, TASTE AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA' Millennium Film Journal, 28, Spring. Pg 49–61
1994 *'TALES OF PAGEANT AND PANTOMIME: A TECHNOLOGICAL NARRATIVE FOR A VIRTUAL ARISTOCRACY'* in 'Unnatural' ed. By Mathew Fuller, Underground Press, London
1993 *'SOFT FUTURE'* in Video Positive '93 exhibition catalogue, Moviola, Liverpool (FACT); and in 'Machine Culture: The Virtual Frontier' ed. Simon Penny, in Visual Proceedings, ACM SIGGRAPH '93, Anaheim, U.S.A. pg 172–174
1990 *'COMPUTER GRAPHICS AS ALLEGORICAL KNOWLEDGE – ELECTRONIC IMAGERY IN THE SCIENCES'* in Digital Image, Digital Cinema. SIGGRAPH '90 Art Show catalogue, Dallas, U.S.A. pg 65–73
'VIDEOGNOSIS: SCIENCE AS VOTEURISM' Mediamatic Vol 5, no. 3. Fall 1990

Video Distribution

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Chronology



List of works

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- 2006 *10,000 COPYRIGHTED IMAGES* 6:50 mins, digital video.
- 2006 *THE INTERNET SPEAKS* web animation and video installation.
- 2006 *THE MIMETICON* web application and interactive installation.
- 2004 *FOREPLAY* 17:14 mins, digital video.
- 2001 *THE BANK OF TIME* online screensaver and web site.
- 1998 *LMX SPIRAL* 7:53 mins, videotape.
- 1997 *PLAY TO WIN* with Martyn Pick, 2:46 mins, videotape.
- 1996 *GRIDLOCK* with Martyn Pick, 1:32 mins, videotape.
- 1995 *THE Z-SPLICER* with Jason White, digital compositing research, 3:25 mins, videotape.
- 1995 *HELIOCENTRUM* with Jason White, 11:15 mins, videotape.
- 1993 *CORPUS* video and sound installation, 4 monitors and video decks.
- 1992 *CORPUS* 6 mins, videotape.
- 1991 *SUPERANIMISM* with Jason White, 3:20 mins, videotape.
- 1987 *STUDIES IN RHYTHM* 1:40 mins, videotape.
- 1986 *CELLS* 1:20 mins, videotape.

Artists's web site: www.futurenatural.net

