

# ***Private Reveries/ Public Spaces***

**Louise K Wilson, September 2001**

## **Introduction**

My visual arts practice is fundamentally research-based and involves the participation of individuals from industry, the military, museums, medicine and scientific research. These associations have previously included: Siemens Medical (Germany), Microsoft (UK), IBM Almaden Research Center (USA), McGill University's Aerospace Medical Research Unit, the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research Lab, the Montreal Neurological Institute, BT Goonhilly Earth Station (Cornwall), and most recently the electronic warfare site at RAF Spadeadam in Cumbria.

My interest in new technologies has largely centred on the sophisticated and specialised imaging machines and data systems which inhabit these laboratory and techno-industrial spaces. Research forays into these institutions (both physical and virtual) have involved co-opting scientists/ researchers and engineers into dialogues as a means to both inform the work and produce original material. Processes of negotiation inside closed or hard to access spaces contribute to the development of subsequent art works. For me, it is essential to refer to the cultural contexts in which these technologies are being applied.

Data which has been specially gathered has included imagery generated by medical imaging technologies (such as magnetic resonance imaging, magnetic resonance spectroscopy, positron emission tomography, EEG etc); scanner tunneling microscopy and microwave transmission. Participatory artworks (installations and performances) made following these associations have incorporated and re-contextualised this imagery as software, video and audio material initially produced as (scientific) data.

Previously I have made participatory installations exploring the physical and psychical ramifications of scientific experimentation for the scientist and subject. I am curious about the nature of experimentation - the protocols, methodologies and personal motivations of scientists and researchers. For **Private Reveries/ Public Spaces** a 'thought experiment' is proposed inviting multiple listener/ participant involvement.

## Flightpaths (sound/ image/ text-based)

### Background

My previous artworks have all to differing extents involved an exploration into - and tacit acknowledgement of - the physicality and tactility of the body. I have been curious to see how far we can use new technologies to address the dimension of sensory experience - the haptic sense - which describes the ways we experience touch both on the surface of the body and inside the body. I wonder, as some theorists have supposed, whether our sensory systems have been permanently reconfigured by the different ways of seeing and the new smells, tastes, and acoustic environments to have emerged in the wake of faster modes of transportation and computer-based imaging systems.

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The MOTOROLA m3788e mobile phone with which I access the Orange network has an "Information" function. This allows a further menu of 3 options: Sport (Football - Rugby - Cricket - Racing - Motorsport - Tennis - Golf - All sport); Lifestyle (News - Business - Lottery - Lucky No - Horoscopes - Weather - Joke) and Finance (Stocks - Futures - Indices - Forex). I haven't yet used the Information function.

The mobile phone handset carries with it the threat of health risks that are still to be quantified. Ironic then, this communication form which engenders intimate and private exchange may be subtly wreaking irreversible physical changes. This wireless device with its invisible flow of language/ text is the starting point for a piece proposing access to information currently unavailable to the phone user and radio listener.

We perceive only a tiny fraction of the information which surrounds us. We are surrounded by a far richer and wider spectrum of wavelengths than we detect through our senses. The majority of the frequencies and rays that caress us pass beneath our threshold of sensation.

It has been calculated we only perceive  $1/(3 \times 10^{35})$  of the electromagnetic spectrum, which is one part in:

300,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000<sup>1</sup>

Engrossed in conversation on the mobile phone in public, we may consciously screen out awareness of the subtle and discrete shifts and changes in the urban

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city landscape though: tidal changes on the river, the flight pattern of migrating birds through the city, cloud formations .

This piece proposes the formulation of a means by which these discrete processes and movements may be individually accessed through the mobile phone. This information may be received either as text and/or iconic image messages (which punctuate the day at random) or deliberately sought out through the "Information" function. This information will refer to both the visible live events occurring locally (such as flocking birds) and those which are only perceivable with technology (such as minuscule seismic shifts and background radiation levels).

These text/ image messages acknowledge a relationship with the city which may be both imagined and scientifically determined. This information is combined with that perceived by the viewer's own body as they walk or loiter, triggering associated memories.

Although the practical feasibility of all aspects of this concept is yet to be ascertained, it is assumed that this (perceivable/ imperceivable) data would be constantly retrieved through a variety of sources via the Internet, phone network, local sources etc. It is possible that specially-located sensors and the mobile phone network might interact together with adapted handsets to offer localised information.

In addition to the individual's handsets, this piece may be expanded to include (web cast or other) broadcast radio in which readers/ listeners contribute personal updates and insights following on from the received texted information. The ability to describe relationships with public spaces<sup>2</sup> may provide an opportunity for wider social interactions.

This work questions the basis of value judgements on information which may otherwise be hidden, discrete or lost to the everyday. This dispersal of pockets of information through the intimacy of the mobile phone is intended to prompt a more considered relationship with others in social spaces.

## Footnotes

1 This figure comes from a book called "Sensory Exotica" by Howard Hughes, quoted by Marcos Novak at the CiiA-Star conference Consciousness Reframed 3 in 2000 .  
Email from Marcos Novak, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2001

2 See the book *On Sight and Insight* by John Hull, which explores his experience of being blind and how his perceptions of things and relationships have altered since becoming blind. John Hull has organised and led tour around cathedrals in Britain, describing and encouraging blind and visually impaired visitors to know and experience these spaces through touch, olfaction, and acoustical awareness.

## Biography

**Louise K Wilson** is a British artist, born in 1965; she studied Fine Art at the University of Northumbria (1987) and Studio Arts at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada (MFA, March 1996). She currently teaches part-time on the Contemporary Media Practice degree course at the University of Westminster.

She has exhibited widely in North America and Europe, most recently in *Spectacular Bodies*, Hayward Gallery, London (2000) *Space Camp*, Dunlop Art Gallery, Canada, (2000); *Dreams in the Void*, Temple Gallery, Philadelphia, (2000) and *East of Eden*, Spacex Gallery, Exeter (2001). Her curatorial project *Flock* will open in Britain in 2003. Her writings have been published in *Parachute*, *Public*, *Angelaki* and *Electronic Culture* amongst other publications.

# Electromagnetic Radiation

Radio Waves

Microwaves

Infrared radiation

visible light: violet indigo blue green yellow orange red

ultraviolet

x-rays

gamma radiation

## Radio waves

UHF

VHF

HF

LF

VLF

## Cloud formations

Cirrus

Cirrocumulus

Altostratus

Alto cumulus

Stratus

Cumulus