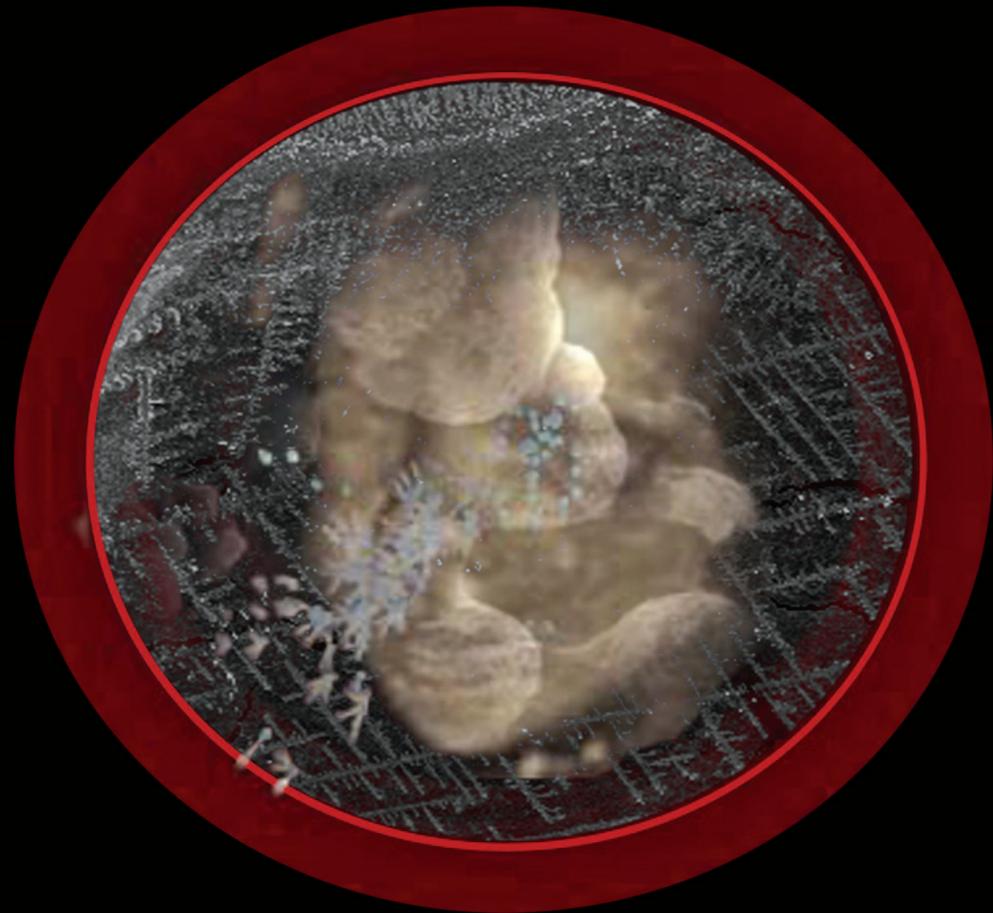


Contagion is an interactive video installation compelling in its interactivity and powerful through its exploration of images, perception, surveillance, bio-security and human interaction.

The tiniest movements of visitors in the installation space are tracked and made visible as colours projected on screen; new colours and sounds are created as visitors paths coincide. However, deep in the shadows lies a threat – a (fictional) highly infective agent. Contagion models the spread of this agent amongst present, past and future visitors, using rules and behaviors based on the epidemiology of SARS and Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza. This data is processed to form the basis of the projected imagery, creating a rich, complex and constantly evolving visual system, accompanied by an atmospheric sound score.

Contagion prompts us to contemplate our own roles of cause and effect within the installation, in relation to the biological spread of diseases and to the dissemination of information, ideas and beliefs.

– Gina Czarnecki



QUT creative industries precinct

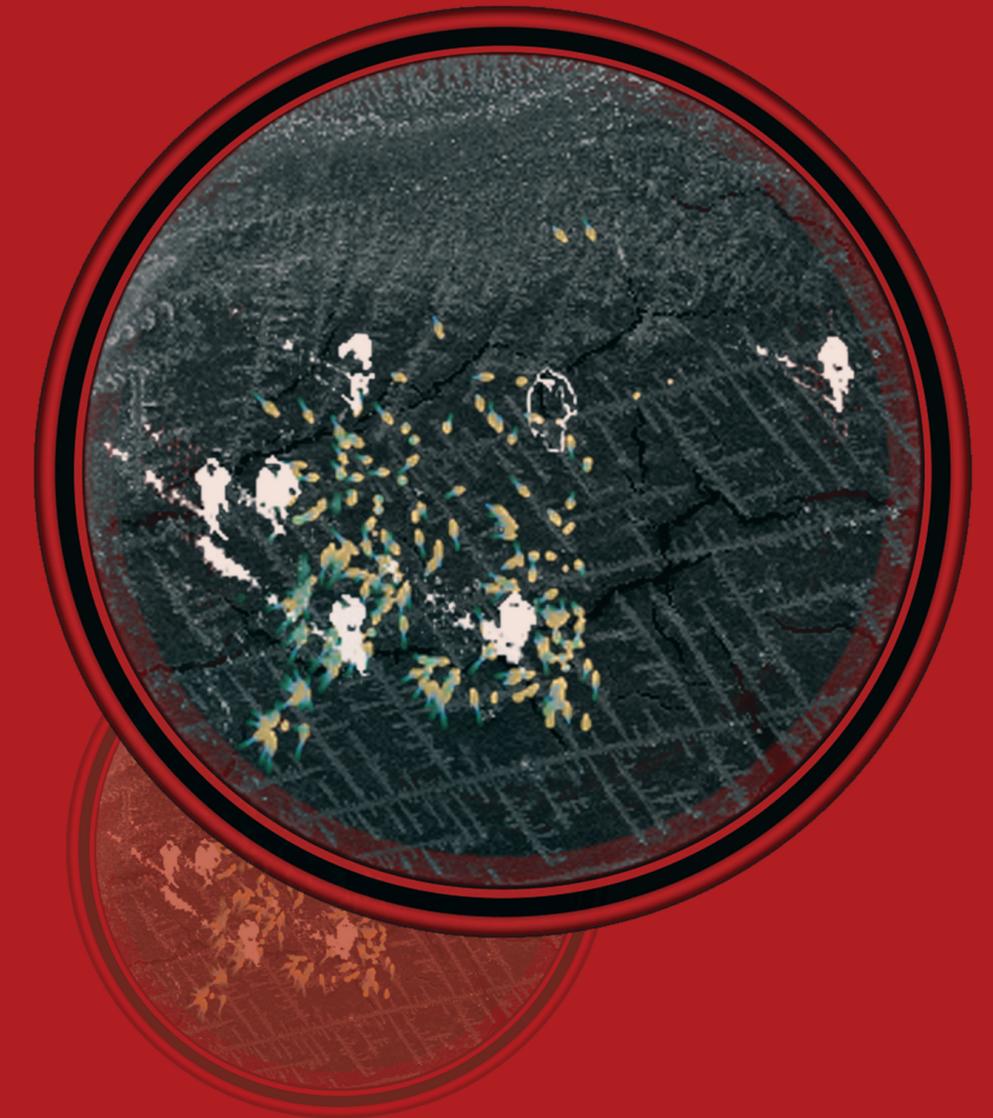
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QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AND BRISBANE FESTIVAL PRESENT



Gina Czarnecki
CONTAGION

Moiré Sinister

The figures in the darkened room move round looking up at the screens where their smoky images move with them. When they touch, colours and sounds intersect. There is a virus in the room.

A virus cannot replicate itself: it needs a host. When William Burroughs described language as ‘a virus from outer space’ he implied that language needs a human host to reproduce, just like any other virus. From the point of view of language, we are just warm meat where it can find the missing sequences that allow its RNA to replicate. Communication needs us in the same way we need air. It doesn’t care about us. Stories don’t care who tells them, so long as they are told again, infecting the next generation. Religions infect generation upon generation. Ideas of science and beauty are passed along like colds. Media are the vectors of viruses, and meaning is their symptom. Meaning and emotion.

Out here in the cold of interstellar space there spins this fragile ball of warmth and wet. It is the most intricate thing we know. On this planet there is a huge biomass, millions of tons of it, called humanity. There is a law of ecological science: for a given area, there is an optimum number of species. You can observe this closely on islands. The human biomass is an island. There are not enough species to populate it. In a crowded world, lots of species would like to live in our nice island environment. many species have been there for millennia, parasites that help us digest and take their percentage off the top, others that clean our teeth. Some are nastier, and kill us if we don’t keep feeding them. And many have no care for us.

These are the viruses that are most like people. They come into an environment – me for example – thrive, reproduce, devastate the place they are in, and move on. This could be the history of SARS, or the history of Australian colonisation. Colonists care no more for the land than digital signals care about cables.

This metaphor breaks down only if you believe, as we have trained ourselves to believe, that cables don’t care about signals either. But the truth is that signals and cables cannot be distinguished from each other, any more than story tellers can be separated from stories, the religious from their religions, media from what they mediate. And since societies are so entirely composed of mediations that it is impossible to conceive of a society without media, we must begin to recognise that infection with the virus of communication is not an option.

It is not an option because the infection brings us great delight. Our media of communication – stories and sex, clothing and cooking, songs and art – have as their symptoms pleasures and meanings we would not forgo. We love our disease.

But there are media we do not love so much. Weapons are media. They have simple, stupid, ugly messages: mostly, they say “Die”. Many of our symbols speak about weapons, and other media we do not love so well, like money and its lack. That is a medium no-one wants to be entirely deprived of, now, in this economic world. Symbols of poverty and pain are mixed with the symbols of love, warmth, comfort and well-being, in unexpected shapes, shapes we call stories, poems, songs, works of art. Or television. Or the internet.

In this darkened room of Contagion, images from television swim up in response to movements and interactions. This is a curiosity. As a species, we were used to making images and symbols. Now they come to find us, in endless streams, seeking out the warm, wet interiors where they can nestle, breed and find new hosts. We think they are ‘our’ media, but the truth is that we are theirs: we are the medium they pass through on their way to the next warm host.

To this extent, humans are like television sets. Nobody cares about the inner life of a television or a computer. Stuff comes in, stuff goes out. There is one difference however. Humans are unusual because what came in to us before stays in us long enough the effect the next thing that comes in. We mutate the messages we get by making them interact with older messages. This makes us translating machines,

machines which routinely produce misunderstanding. We also have the special quality of keeping things for years, even decades at a time, before we pass them on. Secrets, or things we have forgotten, or things we know so surely we have forgotten that once upon a time we had to learn them. Sometimes those things emerge, years later, in some utterly new form, magically transformed or horribly disfigured.

Into this darkened room we bring all our previous contagions: all the pictures, sounds, touches, tastes and scents we have ever sensed. We introduce them to the flux of other images. One shows these smokey figures that are in some electronic mirror ‘us’, pictures moving on a wall. But other pictures nudge at the edges of perception, images of great fragility and great violence. Gathered from the low-resolution environs of the Web, they are not clear. They too bear the scars of their histories, the trails of distribution, compression, decompression, formats they have passed through from camera to projection. They too remember how they got here, though like us they have no recollection of where they came from.

Some recall iconic moments: napalm in a Vietnamese rice field; nuclear tests. Some might be anywhere or any time: ultrasound embryos suspended before gravity; the microscopic replications of germs. Some are fearful. All are anxious, even the innocuous picture of a street corner seems to hide an ominous potential. Once it might have seemed that horror simply took place, untidily in a corner of a field while the rest of the world got on with ploughing and suckling the children. But now every contact, every turn of the road seems to hide a nameless threat.

What are we to do? The world has begun to notice the vast unpopulated pampas of the human biomass, and has begun to hurl at us retroviruses from SARS to ebola.

There is the religious defense. God strikes down his foes, the godless fornicators, with the vengeance of his immuno-deficiency syndrome. The god of the righteous is an unrighteous god. Ignorance is a great defense: there can be no transfer of avian flu to humans because there is no such thing as evolution. To stockpile antigens is blasphemy. Someone should tell George Bush.

Ignorance is deliberate isolation. People make themselves ignorant in an effort to protect themselves from the unwelcome. Their solution is to stop communicating: to allow nothing new into their translation machines, and to repeat forever the mantras of the past, as if the mantra would not mutate and evolve itself into something unrecognisably other than itself. Ignorance and the killing of communication means the beautiful colours and sounds of human interaction, the unforeseen excellence of acquaintance with a new mind, a new body, should be sacrificed. It is a kind of biosecurity, but it is also a kind of anti-immigration law, a Patriot Act of the mind.

It is an irony that so many of our symbols now are made to make us feel insecure, nervous, afraid. It has given rise to what is called biopolitics: the management of populations. Scared of what might happen, we surrender to governments and corporations, experts and civil servants, the task of arranging matters so that we only risk what we must, only gamble on sure-fire winners, or at least ring-fence the stubborn percentage of criminals, psychotics and sick people. From life insurance to epidemiology, we have given away our roll of the dice, our openness to chance, in favour of a planned and authorised regime of the good enough.

Some remnant of our old condition still remains. Mass management of populations has its limits. It can describe and plan for aberrations of the larger kind: crimes, illnesses. But the constant microscopic deviations of a body moving in a darkened room looking upwards at the screen, this is not controllable. If the biopolitical mind that manages populations is a database, the near-involuntary jostlings of people in this room are the database’s unconscious, the material reality of gesture which escapes its plan.

Gina Czarnecki invites us to dive into the gene pool without washing our feet. To splash in the fluids. To take the risks, and to abide by the consequences. From initial exploration and play, the experience of the work gradually reveals its latent causalities, the interactions between people which make a difference. There is a risk of glamourising the terrible pictures, but only if we do not understand the theatre of responsibility which we are invited to perform. The degraded image, smoky, grainy, dusty, foggy, pixellated, its colours drained or displaced, is a token of our place in these chains of connection, the grammar of images, articulated in our eyes as the virus of language is expressed in our voices. We do not chose which language we speak, but we can choose what things we say, and to whom.

Professor Sean Cubitt
Director, Program in Media and Communications
The University of Melbourne

Gina Czarnecki

Gina Czarnecki is a British artist whose work crosses multiple genres and platforms. Forma represents Czarnecki for the production of new projects and distribution of her films and installations.

Developed in collaboration with biotechnologists, computer programmers, dancers and sound artists, Czarnecki’s films and installations are informed by human relationships to image, disease, evolution, genetic research, and by advanced technologies of image production. Through editing sound and image at a micro-level, using bespoke effects and processes, the artist constructs vivid, highly aesthetic spaces. Her work engages the viewer through its scale, beauty and occasionally through interactive technologies.

“Czarnecki’s craft is as intense as tapestry. Each phase and frame is carefully polished, reframed, filtered, flared, and each element of installation worked on in hands and mind... Few artists have made projection truly their medium, interrogated its possibilities, tuned image to canvas as Czarnecki has. The space of projection is a zone of sculptural, architectural, public space in which we confront images of power, grace and terror – images that speak of the necessity of being bodies, of the loneliness of existing inside an epidermis, of the ecstasy of pores and exhalations, the agonies of escape.” – Sean Cubitt (catalogue essay).

Czarnecki’s work has been exhibited internationally at major museums and festivals including the Natural History Museum, London; Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne; Adelaide Film Festival and Ars Electronica, Linz. In 2006, she was commissioned to make Spine, a large-scale video work for outdoor projection, which was exhibited at the AV Festival, Newcastle, UK and as part of the Laneways public art programme, Melbourne.

She won the prestigious Creative Scotland Award in 2002 for work on her interactive installation Silvers Alter, a Fleck Fellowship with the Banff Centre, Canada in 2004, and a Wellcome Trust Sci–Art Award in 2005 for production of Contagion. Her film, Nascent, has been screened extensively across the world, winning several awards and prizes.

Gina Czarnecki lives and works in Liverpool, UK.

Contributor’s Biographies

James Fielding is Surveillance Manager at the Communicable Diseases Section of the Department of Human Services at the State of Victoria, Australia. His interest is the spread of Measles amongst abstainers from the child immunisation programmes in South Australia.

Dr **Stephen Corbett** is Acting Director at the Centre for Population

Health, Sydney and Conjoint Associate Professor at the School of Public Health, Western Clinical School, University of Sydney. He is a leading expert in the environmental aspects and modeling of communicable diseases, and is the author of numerous articles and publications on Public Health issues. He is developing control mechanisms for situations of pandemic disease.

Professor Nick Crofts is a public health practitioner who has contributed substantial research on the spread and control of blood-borne viruses among injecting drug users, especially hepatitis C in Australia and HIV in Asia. Since 1990, he has worked extensively on all aspects of harm reduction, specifically control of HIV associated with drug use, in almost every country in Asia. He co-founded the Asian Harm Reduction Network in 1996 and the Centre for Harm Reduction in 1998. He is now Director of Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre in Fitzroy, Australia.

Keith Skene is a Lecturer in Natural History at the University of Dundee in Scotland. He is interested in how life evolved and how it is structured. His most recent work focuses on the role of energy as the organizing force of the Biosphere, pervading every level, from protein structure to ecosystems, and how such a universal concept can help predict what life on other planets may look like. Keith strongly believes that collaborative work between artists and scientists is essential, if we are to bridge the physical-metaphysical divide. Narrow fields of interest are limiting the human race, in terms of facing the challenges that lie ahead

Christian Fennesz is an internationally renowned electronic musician and composer, who uses guitar and computer to create shimmering, swirling electronic soundscapes of enormous range and musical complexity. Fennesz has created scores for several of Czarnecki’s projects including Spine, Nascent and Infected. He lives and works in Vienna and Paris.

Credits

Gina Czarnecki – Contagion
Sound by Christian Fennesz

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