

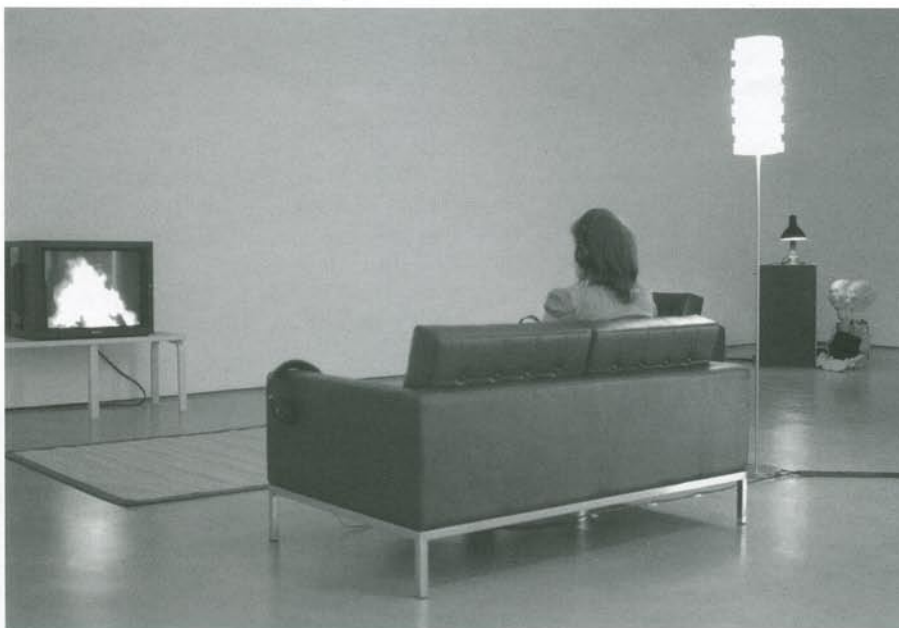
■ Haunted Media

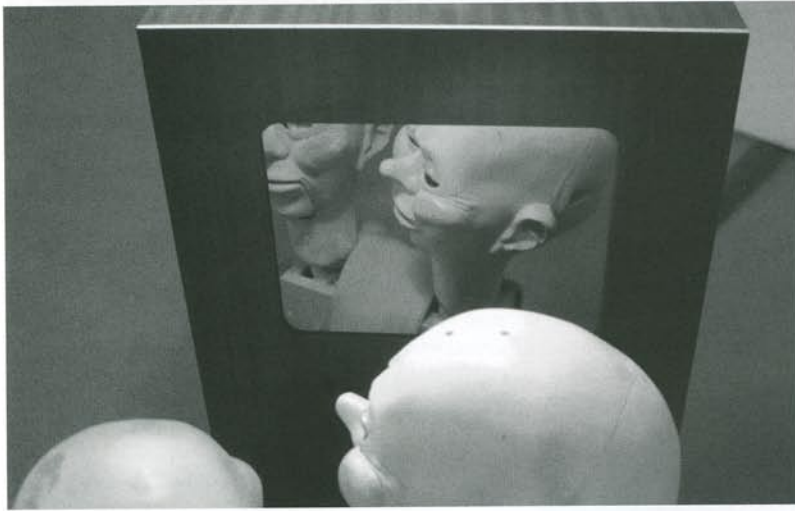
Site Gallery Sheffield February 7 to April 17

In 1848, four years after Samuel Morse sent the first message by electric telegraph, a New York family, the Foxes, claimed that they could hear mysterious knocking sounds in their house; that they could interact with them to communicate with a character they'd named 'Mr Split-foot', and that this was possible because Morse's telegraph had somehow spread into the supernatural ether. The premise of 'Haunted Media' is that, historically, each new communications medium has been thought to act in this way – as a divining rod for paranormal phenomena – and that as our relation to technology becomes increasingly mystifying (do you know how wireless internet works?), we become ever more receptive to presumed trysts between ghosts and machines, ever keener to conflate two meanings of 'medium'. In its careful tightrope walk between extremes of faith and reason, the show also engages a third meaning of the word.

Crank theories are interesting territory for artists, who stand to gain or lose credibility by the manner in which they deal with them. S Mark Gubb, for example, takes on the notion of backwards-masked messages emanating from heavy-metal music in *If You Call a Dog a Cat Enough Times, You'll Notice It Drinking Milk*, 2004. Discmans playing three metal albums backwards – *Led Zeppelin IV*, Judas Priest's *Stained Class*, and Ozzy Osbourne's *Blizzard of Oz* (the last two controversially linked in court to teen suicides) sit below pinned-up printouts of phrases that can now be discerned in them, and further notes that argue for their uncanny connection with world events in the year the disc came out. For example, 'I saw the thread, I hang my head, heavy heavy heavy' (from the backwards version of Led Zeppelin's 1971 disc) supposedly fits with Stanley Kubrick's withdrawal of *A Clockwork Orange* after a copycat rape. The desperation in this wish to locate inexplicable meanings is signalled by the fact that many of the other coincidences escape the time-frame: 'Here's Saddam' on the same record supposedly refers to Hussein's assumption of the Iraqi presidency ... in 1979. And it surely has not escaped the eyes of a rationalist like Gubb that teen angst and metal are hip art subjects in 2004.

Susan Hiller
Belshazzar's Feast 1983-84





Lindsay Seers
Then There Were Three
2003

This work is artfully juxtaposed with Susan Hiller's *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1983-84, which, by contrast but typically for her, dives straight into speculation on the unfathomable. Its footage of a crackling bonfire signals the idiot box's status as successor to the historical hearth – something comforting that might be gazed into and fallen asleep in front of – while the sounds accompanying the visuals segue from mellifluous Arabic singing to conspiratorially whispered descriptions of paranormal phenomena. Reports of eerie happenings – for instance, numerous people independently seeing a ghostly face appearing on their screens after closedown – are followed by descriptions of the bafflement of professional sceptics. Previously shown on TV, Hiller's concertedly irrational film also works brilliantly against the dry, empiricist context of a contemporary art gallery, and taps the seam wherein crank-art is most captivating: the piling-on of fact after unlikely fact until the viewer becomes discombobulated. Yet this is a baton which, by accident or design, the rest of the show doesn't pick up. Featuring only seven artists, mostly represented by only one artwork each, 'Haunted Media' neither attains the convulsive pitch of *Belshazzar's Feast* through another single artwork nor threatens, by accumulation of contributions, to become an overwhelming spiritualist carnival – a case for the illogical conveyed via sheer hallucinatory density – in the manner of, say, Tony Oursler's installations of chattering dummies.

The American artist is himself a ghostly omission or elected absence here, particularly given that he is alluded to repeatedly in the handout and that, in recent years, the haunting of media has been his primary territory (eg the open-air projection *The Influence Machine*, 2000, inspired by the Foxes' Morse-like knockings, and *Timeline*, an epic interactive work collating the historical congruities between technology and spirituality, shown at New York's MoMA in 2001). Lindsay Seers' Oursler-like *Then There Were Three*, 2003, employs a two-headed, mechanised mannequin – which stares into a TV screen and sees a film in which a doppelgänger dummy, with demonic white eyes, shakes its

head violently as if trapped in some hellish liminal otherworld – in order to speculate on the possible effects that being part of the first-ever TV broadcast had on John Logie Baird's own dummy. The filmed mannequin's vague resemblance to schlock-horror staple character Chucky doesn't help one to take it seriously, although Seers seems sincerely interested in postulating an alternative history. More effectual is Thomson & Craighead's *Obituary*, 1997, a short black and white video of a séance shown on a double-sided projection screen. It is filmed from two positions so that the human conduit (face pixellated, adding to the air of legitimacy) is seen from front or back depending where you stand. Instead of the voices the medium is conveying, at which you are left to guess, the soundtrack is an overlapping collage of somberly enunciated greetings'-card messages and tombstone epitaphs – a textual bridge between the living and the dead. Objectivity and restraint engage the viewer's capacities for fantasy and speculation.

Uneven though it is, 'Haunted Media' undeniably succeeds in its collective goal of propagating dialogue and mostly avoids simulating marginal obsession; indeed, it seems to have been at least partly designed as an excuse for the accompanying symposium, chaired by Hiller, which aimed to discuss – among other things – whether 'ghost-busting' mobile phone signals will put an end to psychic phenomena manifesting themselves through our media. Its determination to leave so many avenues teasingly open led this viewer at least, a floating voter in the paranormal universe, to inhale a mass of crank- and scientific literature in search of some kind of closure, a process that tends to leave a reader wishing they'd never started. There was, however, another impediment to writing about the show. When he sat down to type, the aforementioned viewer's computer started acting up almost immediately, the web browser mysteriously turning white and the text not corresponding to the keystrokes. He writes these words, believe it or not, with a pencil. ■

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DAVID BURROWS

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