



Connecting You Robyn Backen
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Canberra Contemporary Art Space Gorman House



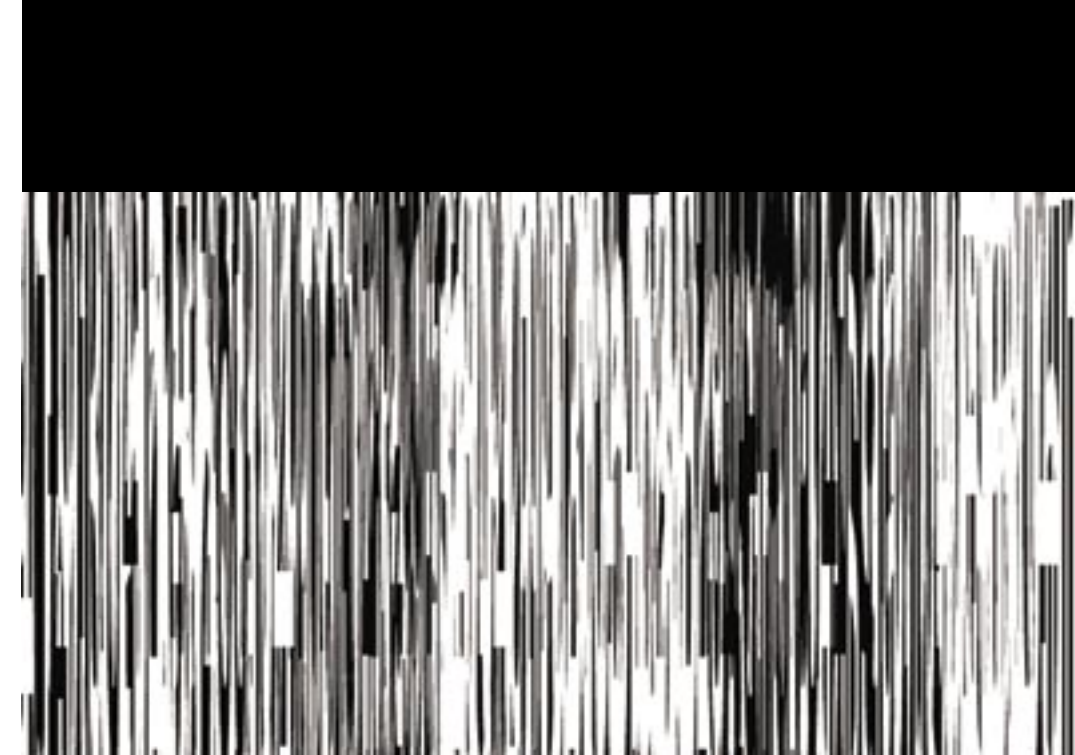
All images: Robyn Backen *A Very Enchanting Thing* installation view 2007 - 09
Photographer Ian Hobbs

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CONNECTING YOU ROBYN BACKEN

Robyn Backen is the epitome of an interdisciplinary artist. Communications technologies (both old and new) are her media and over many years she has focused on their histories, functions and impact on global communities. At the centre of *Connecting You* is the humble telephone and the title evokes an era when an operator would advise the caller of a successful connection.

"A gracious good afternoon, this is Miss Tomlin at the telephone company. Have I reached the party to whom I am speaking?" (1)

Every call begins with a state of disconnection; the conversion of sound waves into electrical signals that transmit the human voice is essentially an out of body experience. The phonograph, when first introduced to New Guinea tribesmen, was described as a "box of ghosts" and its potential for recording the voices of spirits was not lost on its inventors. Unsatisfied with machinery that connects only the living, humans have yearned for a system of communication that reaches beyond the grave.

"Mr Watson—Come here—I want you" (2)

It is scarcely surprising therefore that the invention of the telephone in 1876 coincides with an increasing popular interest in séances during the second half of the 19th century. Ever since New York's Fox sisters reported 'spirit raps' (knocking and tapping) emanating from their bedroom in 1848 there developed a relationship between telecommunications and the things that go bump in the night. Alexander Graham Bell's assistant, Thomas A. Watson, considered electricity to be an experience that was closely related to the 'science' of spiritual communications.

At the *fin de siècle*, telephony and séances had given women a voice, albeit a strange one. In the United States, Victoria Claflin Woodhull, celebrity medium and first woman to run for president in 1872, was but one of thousands of mediums to be liberated by channeling the departed. After all, the medium really was the message and the dead were able to say things considered inappropriate for a lady of the time. Soon after, the telephone, like the séance, provided women with a means of communication that would provide some relief from isolation and the drudgery of domesticity. As the miracle of distance communications became established, so the wires were increasingly crossed and spiritualists, including Mr Watson, imagined that spirit raps were an attempt to communicate using Morse code.

Connecting You, like many of Backen's previous installations, looks broadly at the history and implications of mass communications. On one level she works with the hardware - six Bakelite telephones arranged in a semi circle before a large mirror that create a circle through reflection. From the medieval round table to the séance, the circle has been an important element in facilitating communication. Backen's reference to the (body) language of the round table also alludes to the high level meeting, brilliantly satirized in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* (1964). In the war room where each delegate is provided with a telephone it becomes the instrument through which the end of the world is announced. Embedded in cinema history, the amusing conversation in which US President

Merkin Muffley apologetically advises Dimitri, his Soviet counterpart, of imminent nuclear annihilation follows the mundane conventions of a most ordinary telephone call.

"Why do you think I'm calling you? Just to say hello?... (3)

Backen also obliquely evokes *Dr Strangelove*'s absurd war room with a sound component that includes the recently released telephone conversations of President John F. Kennedy, US President from 1960-63. The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, a standoff between the United States and Soviet Union, brought the world to the brink of nuclear destruction and I remember photographs at this time of President Kennedy on the phone. Effective political propaganda, such images gave the impression that the President was not only concerned and engaged but also connected - like President Muffley an ordinary man dealing with extraordinary problems by ordinary means. The most democratic of instruments, today phones are used for everything from affairs of state to finding one's friends in the supermarket. Backen's circular sound component further addresses the breadth of usage by using mobile phone conversations found on buses and trains as well as GPS and Morse code table tapping.

The Bakelite telephones of Backen's installation ring intermittently, generating an atmosphere of urgency. In these days of fibre optics, satellites and the ubiquitous mobile phone this annoying urgency continues. Voicemail and message banks have failed to assuage the intense pressure of the ring tone and *Connecting You* moves into this contemporary zone of hi-tech telephony through participative performance. Using the mobile phone numbers of friends and colleagues who will attend the opening, Backen has produced a screen-based work that imagines these phone numbers in binary conversation, as digitized noise, merging and collapsing into one another. This element of the installation has the appearance of code that produces a sense of infinite electronic hysteria. The exhibition opens with performance, during which ringing phones that cannot be ignored rudely interrupt the speeches. From the moment the gallery doors open the phones are activated and Backen challenges the audience with a history of developing dependence; the price for being connected.

David Broker

(1) Ernestine the telephone operator, Lily Tomlin This is a Recording Ice House Pasadena 1971

(2) First words of Alexander Graham Bell to his assistant Mr Watson on the electrical speech machine

(3) President Merkin Muffley, Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* (1964)

