

MISS SCARLET IN THE LOUNGE

Ted Whitaker



Figure 1. Ted Whitaker; *Miss Scarlet in the Lounge*, 2015, found old-media, custom casing, 3D-printed object, video, Galerie NIKA, Prague.

In 2015 I studied at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague, working in the Super Media Studio which has a focus on technology and the use of media. The ideology and conversations around technology that were carried on there were simultaneously embracing and suspicious of certain media developments. The term 'super' was used in a variety of ways, to describe both the technology used and attitudes to a given creative approach. The carefully worded title of the studio steers away from problematic terms such as 'new media' or 'moving image.'



Figure 2. Ted Whitaker; *Miss Scarlet in the Lounge*, 2015, found old-media, custom casing, 3D-printed object, video, Galerie NIKA, Prague.

This studio environment, along with its location in central Europe, enhanced my studio practice in both old and new media, giving me access to resources ranging from historically rich flea markets to contemporary technology. My first exhibition in the Czech Republic, *Miss Scarlet in the Lounge*, embraced these conversations involving media archaeology and network cultures.

In the work, the vintage board game Cluedo played out in the setting of a grand old mansion. The location can only be imagined in the British countryside. Six characters strode the cold and empty corridors, each suspected of committing the murder of Dr Black, the mansion's owner. Tension arose as each player became closer to solving the mystery through discovering three key clues – the scene of the murder; what implement was used and by whom.

The exhibition title, *Miss Scarlet in the Lounge*, made a direct reference to the Cluedo scenario. The work was exhibited at Galerie NIKA, a small glass capsule-like space situated in the metro station of Karlovo Namesti in Prague, Czech Republic. The gallery is curated by Markéta Jonasova and funded by UMPRUM, the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. Each exhibition in NIKA runs for four weeks and typically shows new works made to fit the unique characteristics of the space. Located in a metro station, the works are viewed by a diverse audience, usually in fleeting moments in transit.

The heart of my work *Miss Scarlet in the Lounge* is a found old-media device, a Soviet Super 8 camera from the 1960s. The camera is dysfunctional, corroded and on the verge of obsolescence. It rests comfortably, strapped down and embedded in a green felted box suggestive of a pool table. The camera has been modified by replacing the original lens – which was broken – with one reproduced using a 3D printer. Encased in felt, the camera is wired to a vintage analogue monitor placed on a trolley alongside. The video that appears on the screen simulates



Figure 3. Ted Whitaker, *Miss Scarlet in the Lounge*, 2015, found old-media, custom casing, 3D-printed object, video, Galerie NIKA, Prague.

DNI (Direct Neural Interface), a direct communication pathway between the brain and an external device, here apparently visualising thoughts or memories. The images on the screen take the form of a fleet of ghosts gliding through a decaying Baroque interior (the Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace, Prague), amid the exhibition *Superimpositions*, curated by Monika Dizkova.

Galerie NIKA replicated the mood of *Cluedo* by placing the object up for questioning. The technology was an implement in the crime. In the work, the vintage camera lay in a comfortable felt box, as if resting; the old camera has arrived at a destination that is somewhere between a museum, a hospital and a psychiatric ward, ready for interrogation as to what information it can provide to throw light on the murder case.

The technology presented within Galerie NIKA stood on trial, extracting information in a penal-like setting. The images, extracted through a simulated DNI, anthropomorphised the camera as if it were on trial. These human-like traits attributed to the electronic device aided a compassionate response to the issues of personal interrogation and surveillance that it elicited while on show in Galerie NIKA.

The camera used in the exhibition represents a specific era on a timeline of technological development. From the viewpoint of the consumer electronics world, it is ancient history. While the camera references the past, and may well appear stylised neutrally in a twentieth-century aesthetic, the work is set firmly in the present, abetted by modern technology in the form of a 3D-printed human object. In the twenty first century, 3D printers have solidified their place through the freedom offered by open source technology. Controversy arose in 2013 when Cody R Wilson, a 25-year-old University of Texas law student, sought to build semiautomatic weapons using 3D printers. This has become possible in an environment where an active online community shares files that enable weapons to be 'printed': "just as it's clear that 3D printing is set to boom, it's clear that Wilson and company have changed the boundaries of what that boom will bring."¹



Figure 4: Ted Whitaker, *Miss Scarlet in the Lounge*, 2015, found old-media, custom casing, 3D-printed object, video, Galerie NIKA, Prague.

The small 3D-printed component that features in *Miss Scarlet in the Lounge* is intended to locate the work in two periods; as it traverses the changes it also challenges an older generation as it interfaces with technology. The camera contains human characteristics, namely those of a hospital patient. The 3D-printed limb is a reference to medical technology and reflects contemporary humanity's desperate attempts to find ways to survive.

The subject of the video – the suggested memory of the camera – was created with humour in mind. Actors were dressed as cliché ghosts in white sheets with eye-holes cut out. The ghosts glide through the Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace, through an exhibition mounted by three young artists. Although not directly linked to the exhibition, the work has a role to play as *Superimpositions* was curated as an intervention by young artists showing their work in a grand Baroque building. Their works reference digital culture as a return to the object while reacting to their immediate environment, refusing to compete with the dramatic intensity of the exhibition space. The video in my work was edited and colour-graded to appear like a fragmented, dreamlike sequence of images. It was recorded digitally, manipulated in post-production and exported to analogue-compatible media for display. While the analogue display softens the edges, it adds another layer through which the image is mediated.

The murder mystery in the Cluedo game may never be resolved, locked in a perpetual stalemate within the time capsule of Galerie NIKA.

Ted Whitaker is a MFA candidate at the Dunedin School of Art. His research is focused on media archaeology, retro culture and art after the Internet. He is an independent artist and curator exhibiting in private, public and artist-run galleries. He is the co-chair of the Aotearoa Digital Arts Network (ADA), curator of BRUCE Gallery and editor of the independent surf zine Black Wax.

¹ Erin Lee Carr; *Click, Print, Gun: The Inside Story of the 3D-Printed Gun Movement*, 25 March 2013, <http://motherboard.vice.com/read/click-print-gun-the-inside-story-of-the-3d-printed-gun-movement-video>.