



# First Contact

An interactive installation questioning our interpretation of exotic consciousness  
By Nino Filiiu. Media: screen, artificial intelligence, live video processing

First contact with alien civilizations, conversation with artificial intelligences, abstract art analysis—these are all forms of esoteric communication with an entity supposedly conscious that interacts with intent. But what if the impression of consciousness and intent doesn't emerge from the entity we're communicating with, but rather from within ourselves?

On August 6, 1967, Irish astrophysicist Jocelyn Bell Burnell picked up a strange radio signal from outer space: 0.04 second pulses emitted at regular intervals of 1.3373 seconds. At this point in the history of astrophysics there was no explanation for such a phenomenon, and even some scientists believed this to be proof of intelligent extraterrestrial life, mandating that the discovery be kept secret so as not to trigger mass hysteria. The code name for the signal was LGM-1, standing for "little green men 1".

The signals were actually caused by an undiscovered family of rapidly rotating neutron stars called pulsars, and the graph that Jocelyn Bell Burnell plotted amusingly made its way into the cover art of *Unknown Pleasures* by Joy Division.

But what is interesting about this story is the short moment between the discovery of the radio signals and their explanation, where most of humanity unconditionally projected ideas of intelligence, sentience, and consciousness onto them. This is actually pretty common in science; there is a never-ending list of people seeing either aliens or God's hand in active areas of research like dark matter, string theory, or quantum physics.

It seems as if there is something inside of us that can't bear the idea that when an entity communicates with us in a way that is complex yet indecipherable, there is no consciousness behind it. That is based on this observation that *First Contact* makes sense.

*First Contact* is an installation where a stream of abstract visuals appears on a screen in front of the spectator, whose picture and voice are being recorded and processed by an

artificial intelligence that detects face expression and hand positions. These physical inputs are being fed into a program that analyzes them and makes the video evolve in real time, thereby creating some kind of exotic conversation between the spectator and the machine.

For example, when the spectator is first seen by the machine, its visuals would "awaken", going from slowly evolving dream-like sequences to loops with a faster pace, then slowing down again when the spectator leaves, clearly proving that the machine has *perception*.

Some interactions are less direct. If the spectator clenches their fist, the visual stream starts expressing anger, with heavy use of harsh textures, but not when certain words are being spoken, as if the machine not only perceives your physical behavior but is more profoundly aware of you, it is cognizant of the information it has.

The behavior of the program is not being disclosed to the spectator and is near impossible to reverse-engineer, as it is not the goal of the installation to be fully *understood*, rather to be *felt*. It should be derived from the emotions rather than the intellect that the spectator should feel the machine think. In other words, the goal for the spectator is not to decipher the language of the machine, but rather to feel the existence of a language being spoken.

In this regard, *First Contact* is much closer to an abstract work of art than systems that attempt to give the illusion of consciousness by being indiscernible from human beings: AI chatbots like ChatGPT in real life, or golem-related sci-fi creatures like Ava in *Ex Machina*.

These *imitative AIs* are pretty hard to engineer, for the simple reason that the human brain is the most complex structure in the universe and it's extremely good at many things; coincidentally being uncanny valley'd by imperfect imitations is one of them, so *First Contact* doesn't take this road.

The installation is actually much closer to esoteric movies by directors like Lynch who famously refuses to give explanations to his stories, letting the viewer make his own interpretations, because only then would the story make sense - only with characters created by the viewer themselves, in other words only with life projected by the viewer onto the work of art, and unintuitively not the other way around.