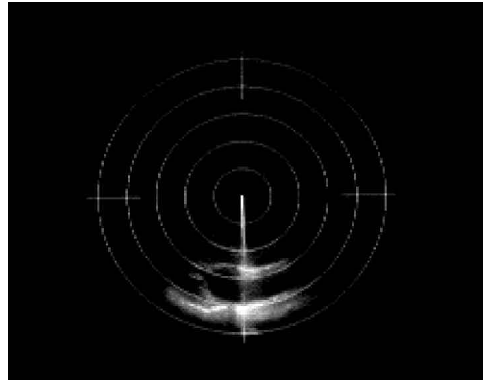


social development. Of course, unlike earlier Judaeo-Christian references to the word of God, UTC provides no apocalyptic endpoint to which separate communities might faithfully attune themselves, and thus no greater spiritual cause to attend. Nevertheless, Coordinated Universal Time does offer its own unique brand of psychological and social comfort, whatever time zone we might find ourselves in. Hirsch's sculpture clearly acknowledges the particular mode of faith modern viewers place in the constant pulse of a universally accepted measurement of time. Standing, facing the echocardiogram, watching Hirsch's aortic valve flip open and closed with determined regularity, the viewer first finds herself slightly (re)pulsed, alienated yet again by the "B" movie quality of the sculptural oddity at her feet. Paired, however, with the calm, mechanical voice, intoning each progressive minute of daily life, the object seems somehow less threatening, perhaps even benign. Soothed by the march of time, we regain our sense of place, relieved to discover that we haven't lost our connection to our particular place in the surrounding space-time continuum: eight hours behind GMT, benevolently watched over by the voice from Colorado.

To admit the encroachment of such technical devices as digital media, cybernetics and biotech, etc. into our personal lives is no longer noteworthy. The long feared dehumanising image of technology as an agent of destruction, ever present within the "B" movie genre, seems now a relic of another era. How then to represent technology's increasingly naturalised role in our lives? For Hirsch, the ever-growing networks of communication grids provide a telling image of the subtle, often ephemeral lattices of power and influence over our lives. If the image of the heart seems shockingly small and alien here, so, too, stands the viewer beneath the pulse of electromagnetic information directed towards her. Once again, the ionosphere momentarily reveals itself – not through the thermonuclear explosion, but through the often equally domineering framework of time announcing that another minute has gone by.

Andrew Klobucar
09/05/03



Antonia Hirsch
Pulse

April 26 to May 31, 2003

Post Script is a new initiative of Artspeak, designed to encourage the development of innovative critical writing about the visual arts by Vancouver writers, to provide critical feedback to emerging and mid-career artists and to further enhance cross fertilization of ideas between the visual art and writing community.

Information about this exhibition is available on-line at www.artspeak.ca

Artspeak gratefully acknowledges the support of the **Hamber Foundation** for this project.

Artspeak would like to extend our sincere thanks to **Michael Audain** for his support of this project.



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Artspeak is a member of the Pacific Association of Artist Run Centres (PAARC). **Artspeak** gratefully acknowledges the support of The Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council, the City of Vancouver, the Vancouver Foundation, The BC Gaming Commission, Heritage Canada, our volunteers and members.

POST SCRIP

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Pulse

Postscript to Pulse

If there is a geographical location still able to evoke an aura of myth this side of the 20th century, a space where speculation outweighs measurement and definition remains rudimentary at best, it would surely be the ionosphere. Covering close to a thousand kilometres of space above the earth's surface, the ionosphere marks the point where the planet's atmosphere literally ends and the vacuum of outer space begins. But such parting is neither distinct nor abrupt; the ionosphere presents instead a very gradual separation of earth and sky. As a result, its actual properties remain uniquely obscure. Convinced that such a space of mystery has some value, on 9 July 1962, the U.S. began their formal ingress into this blurry area of the heavens. Three nuclear weapons were discharged at varying heights, ranging from 60 to several hundred kilometres above the earth, in order to test the strength and properties of the powerful, yet little understood, magnetic fields of energy found there. Although confined to the very edges of our atmosphere, the effects of the explosions seemed momentous enough to any observers on the ground. Radio communication world-wide was temporarily knocked out and the explosions themselves generated domes of light that could be seen across the Pacific from Los Angeles to South Asia. The ionosphere suddenly yielded something of its veiled existence to the modern western eye perpetually in search of new frontiers of power and resource management.

Such incursions continue to this day. Ionospheric technology, almost all of it U.S. military-based, summons an incredible array of possible uses, ranging from a unified world-wide communication system that would replace all current radio, satellite and television broadcasts to the construction of a single gigantic electromagnetic weapon able to recreate with one pulse the effect of hundreds of ground based nuclear explosions simultaneously detonated. Only the sheer size, scope and variability of ionospheric energy enable such a wide conception of its power. Few materials outside of water and oxygen can claim the degree of



potential influence on human life that this virtual canopy of electromagnetic energy commands. For Antonia Hirsch, it is precisely the immense scale and near ubiquitous presence of this type of field that makes it a model canvas on which to explore the ongoing blurring of conceptual and natural environments within contemporary culture. Her latest piece, *Pulse*, with its focus on time itself as a curious by-product of ionospheric transmission, provides her most physically complete rendering yet of the complex interrelationship between individuals and the abstract frameworks of technology that continue to define our lives. In *Pulse*, Hirsch signifies the ionosphere by relaying the continuous shortwave broadcast of Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) transmitted from Colorado. The ionosphere provides an ideal medium for the long distance propagation of radio signals using high frequencies above 2 MHz – precisely the level suited for signals as seemingly elementary as the coordination of world time. To regard Hirsch's piece as sculptural, however, compels our immediate attention to its physical (as opposed to conceptual) attributes. At a height of less than four feet, *Pulse* seems small, almost demure in stature, yet the piece commands a remarkably strong presence in the room. Solitary and chic, its glossy

white surface coolly reflecting the viewer's gaze back at her, *Pulse* radiates a strange insolence. Its form does not sit comfortably within the gallery space; rather it seems to resist its context at nearly every level. One approaches the piece as one would any unknown technology or machine – with extreme caution, keeping a protective distance, letting the person in front of you touch it first.

If such a scene seems strangely familiar, it is because the *mise-en-scène* the piece inspires finds precedence in at least a dozen of Hollywood's most cherished science fiction "B" movies: dropped mysteriously from some unknown origin, a strange object draws a community of nervous onlookers ever closer towards it. Centred among them, an alien purpose hums away oblivious to its surrounding environment, enveloping all viewers in a cascade of white noise. But what exactly has arrived? Standing upright, pointed rudely skywards at a 45-degree angle, its two flat pedestals and nozzle-shaped front alternately suggest something vaguely anthropomorphic and bluntly weapon-like. Its bipedal structure anticipates a sort of comical waddle, as if the object, at the slightest provocation, might suddenly decide to rear up and begin moving about the room like some large, plastic wind-up toy. Its nozzle protrudes with a stylised curiosity that seems somehow simultaneously cute and invasive. Again, one doesn't want to get too close for fear of being victimised by some misguided, prying snout. Only the black tubing discharged from its rear end, pseudo-umbilical in style, provides some assurance of safety. We may not understand the object's purpose, but at least we know it is spatially limited, securely leashed, as the object is, to the institution in which it is housed.

To return to the conceptual qualities of the piece leads us to consider its more explicit references to technology. The sculpture's rounded, polished, hard white shell might place its origins in some 1970s Arthur C. Clark-inspired vision of late 20th century space travel. Given a larger version of the object, one might easily conjure up a new type of telescope or astronomical device; reduce its size, and the viewer no doubt imagines a kind of

microscope. Its present dimension, however, evokes only ambiguity as to whether the object's scope is outward or inward, magnifying or minimising, expansive or restrictive; yet that is precisely the level of doubt Hirsch wants to instil in the viewer. If there is a single gesture or activity the object's form is meant to suggest, it seems best defined by the actual title: *Pulse* – a particular movement that connotes both rhythmic pattern and a sudden shift in quantified energy. Wave or particle, single beat or regular contraction, no activity better defines the variety of references the piece connotes. The very word itself is synonymous with an acute understanding of contemporary culture's most current values and associations: to have one's finger on the pulse of it all is to understand what an earlier modernist perspective would have labelled the *zeitgeist* or spirit of the age. The animating energy of all things material, modern physics' true ghost in the new machine is the pulse. Omni-directional, both distinct and of a pattern, the pulse is the most rudimentary signature of the universe yet imagined.

It is hardly radical, then, to combine conceptually, as Hirsch has done, the pulse of time with that of her own heart, represented here deep within the sculpture by a looped echocardiogram video. Viewing the organ via the eyepiece placed atop the nozzle, we are momentarily deceived into thinking we have found the heart, so to speak, of the artwork – the one organic component, throbbing heroically amidst various confining technologies. But Hirsch's wit presents a more complex, even contradictory, relationship. In Hirsch's *Pulse*, it is the image of the heart that stands pre-recorded and the voice of technology that is live. Although abstract and certainly bereft of all local, organic meaning, the radio broadcast of Coordinated Universal Time constitutes the only active component of the piece. Our true lifeline, the artery of communication between all continents, all cultures, Coordinated Universal Time picks up where biblical scripture left off 500 years ago with the advent of secular humanism within Europe. The representation of UTC continues to provide the modern standard by which to measure all national,