

This essay accompanies the exhibition *Bridge Kids* by Geoffrey Pugen
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Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

Technologies of Intuition: Geoffrey Pugen's *Bridge Kids*

by Eli Horwatt

"...intuition may enable us to grasp what it is that intelligence fails to give us, and indicate the means of supplementing it."

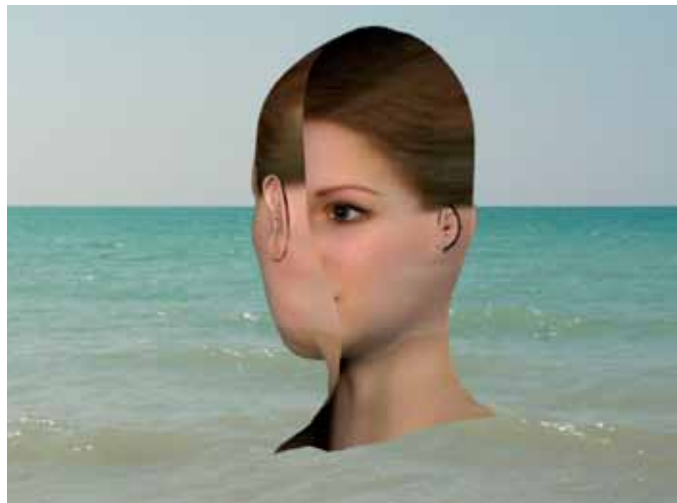
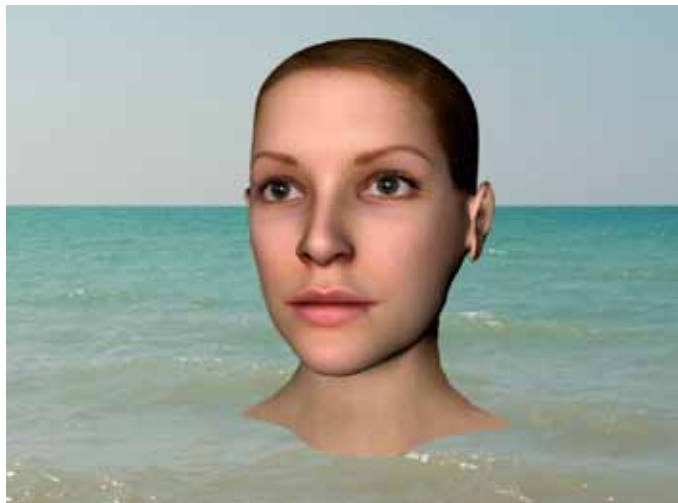
– Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*

Geoffrey Pugen's installation *Bridge Kids* could be likened to an accumulation of historical artifacts, each video and photograph seeming to provide further evidence for the existence of his principal creation—Julia Denzig. The installation's schizophrenic diversity of forms and media, encompassing photographs, digital composites, and even a soap opera, flips the Benjaminian paradigm of mechanical reproduction on its head by imagining how technologies of representation might create aura and traverse the gap between the fictive and the real.

Comprised of three channels (which incorporate film, video and computer generated imagery - CGI) and a series of photographs, *Bridge Kids* moves through physical, technological, and psychic spaces producing a

rhizomatic network of images and videos. Geoffrey Pugen embeds an invented personage across 20th century history, appropriating and redeploying the aesthetic and formal modes of representation that gradually become indexical links to the past. To walk through the installation is to bear witness to a historical forgery, calling forth questions of how history and reality are shaped through technologies of representation.

Perhaps the most mysterious and emblematic video in the installation depicts the face of Julia Denzig as a rotating computer-generated mask floating over water. An optical illusion constructed from found images, the mask temporarily displaces the capacity to identify how an image occupies three-dimensional space. Pugen has created conditions in



Geoffrey Pugen, still from *Virtual Bust of Julia Denzig*, 2010

which the spectator seeks to locate the “realness” of a virtual image, a pattern of thinking he will restage throughout *Bridge Kids*. The manufactured environment introduces a kitschy pastiche of computer-generated imagery, and yet despite its transparent artificiality, we are led to contemplate its verisimilitude, anticipating one of the central inquiries of the installation: at what point might the technologies of the virtual facilitate the same gravitas of experience in a subject as the real? How does the exercise of locating the realness of mediated sensual experience condition us mentally to become passive in the construction of our own reality? How do mental processes like intuition supersede the intellect in our apprehension of the real?

The invented and historically embedded personage of Julia Denzig appears as a CGI composite in the Denzig mask illusion, as a psychic ingénue in the forged soap opera *The Rhine Experiments*, and as a spiritual guide in the eponymous film *Bridge Kids*. Appearing in all three moving-image channels, Julia Denzig is a fictional composite of real subjects studied by parapsychologist J.B. Rhine (1895-1980). The greatest advocate for the study of parapsychology, Rhine was unique for his ability to convince so many, for so long, that psychological phenomena exist outside of our current understanding of the physical limits of space and time. The singularity of Rhine as a spokesperson, fundraiser, and writer has yet to be matched in the history of the discipline, which waned significantly after the closing of the Parapsychology Lab at Duke University (founded by Rhine in 1930) upon his retirement in 1965. Using this historical episode as a metaphor, Pugen both invents and follows the historical trajectory of Denzig and Rhine, examining how reality itself

might become mediated through the prism of false history.

Over the course of the *Bridge Kids* installation, Julia Denzig appears in multiple bodily manifestations (virtual avatar, soap opera star, and mythological spirit guide), in various mediums (film, video, and CGI), and at different points in time (fictional past, timeless virtual space, and future). All of these manifestations of Denzig are tied to Pugen’s interest in the capacity for technologies of representation to resurrect the imaginary in real space, including the gallery. The photographs presented at the beginning of the installation appropriate and recontextualize images from Pugen’s research on ESP with images recalling the film *Bridge Kids*, reinforcing themes of psychic imagery and intuition as they are superimposed over the natural and further blurring the lines between “real” and invented history.

An intuitive artist working in a conceptual framework, Pugen weaves together thematic and narrative threads without insisting on exposition. The role of intuition, as an elusive yet seemingly instinctual drive existing outside of both mind and body, has shaped the story of *Bridge Kids*, as has Pugen’s interest in Parapsychology. Intuition figures in the myriad decisions involving materials, processes, and research that constitute a cohesive work of art. The notion of extra sensory perception—the capacity to see beyond the immediately perceptible—precludes the making of something from nothing: the engineering of a number of variables into a fully realized state. In a sense, each act of art making is an attempt at clairvoyance, a reconciliation of thought, idea, and the imaginary with reality. However Pugen fuses intuitive art making processes (like the invention



Geoffrey Pugen, *Sphenoidal Forest*, 2010



Geoffrey Pugen, *String Matrix*, 2010

of Denzig) with a conceptual framework considerate of how medium and form should function. Also noteworthy is Pugen's process working with child actors Jill O'Craven (who plays the central character Kathy in the film *Bridge Kids*) and Victoria Goncalves (who plays her friend Kent, unnamed in the film), encouraging them to improvise scenes by exploring their own intuitive connection to one another.

Pugen is interested in parapsychology both as a historical moment in which the supernatural is absorbed into modern scientific epistemology and as a negotiation of intuitive processes through the scientific method. The discipline distinguished itself from the pseudo-sciences it was often compared to through J.B. Rhine's use of controlled laboratory testing, meta-analysis of statistical findings, and the development of increasingly sophisticated controls and conditions for testing. However, despite Rhine's attempts to unite the scientific method with studies of ESP, clairvoyance, and psychokinesis, he was plagued by allegations of fudging data, using flawed methodologies, and in a number of egregious cases, fraud. Detractors attacked the legitimacy of Rhine's methods, or argued that even if accepted at face value, his research proved nothing.¹

One of the questions haunting the findings of many parapsychological studies is that perhaps the rigorous objectivity of the scientific method was not the appropriate means for its exploration. In the declassified report "Parapsychology in Intelligence: A Personal Review and Conclusions," Kenneth A. Kress, an analyst at the CIA, details government research into the use of parapsychology as a means of gathering intelligence. In the words of an independent CIA psychologist tasked with reviewing Kress'

findings, "a large body of reliable experimental evidence points to the inescapable conclusion that extrasensory perception does exist as a real phenomenon, albeit characterized by rarity and lack of reliability."² It would be safe to deduce that because these phenomena are based in large part on intuition, and intuition is largely understood as ephemeral, immeasurable, and incommensurate with the procedures used to validate scientific truths, rigorously quantifying intuitive phenomena is highly unlikely.

In his famous 1907 book *Creative Evolution*, Henri Bergson asserts that while the intellect has provided great leaps in the comprehension of inert forms, pure scientific method has little recourse in understanding the fluid experience of life. Bergson placed the intellect in opposition to intuition.³ Perhaps the Sisyphean task for Rhine was not in documenting the existence of psychic events, but rather in trying to explicitly demonstrate them. Perhaps the qualitative methodologies of sociology, history, and speculative metaphysics would be better suited. Or perhaps, as Pugen suggests, it is the proper task of art.

Governing the ideas that circulate through *Bridge Kids* is the conceit that, in the future, human beings will remain in a perpetual state of childhood, possess uncanny forms of intuition and psychic perception, and be devoted to recovering the loss of history by engaging in the study of media designed to retrieve the past. The film principally focuses on Kathy, a pre-adolescent student (though the age of these characters is ultimately ambiguous due to their arrested physical development) whose class project on Julia Denzig turns into a psychic connection allowing her to bring forth Denzig's possessions, and possibly Denzig



J. B. Rhine uses Zener Cards to test a woman for ESP



Geoffrey Pugen, still from *The Rhine Experiments*, 2010

herself. However, Kathy's attempts to conjure Julia Denzig through an assortment of psychic techniques are derailed by her interest in and telepathic connection to another girl in her class—the curious and defiant Kent (named by Pugen, but never mentioned by name in the film).

In seeking to quantify intuitive psychic processes, Rhine and his collaborators thought up a complex system of technologies and devised scientific methodologies to calculate the presence of ESP and other psychic abilities in test subjects. Pugen has turned this process on its head, working instead to uncover how technologies of the virtual (which would include information platforms like the Internet and representative regimes like film, video, and CGI) can produce psychic effects. Pugen asserts that contemporary technologies may reflect a desire to become psychic, referring to the myriad of ways individuals may now track the location of friends (through GPS and smart phone technology), remotely view distant locations and persons (webcams, live video streaming), or retrieve information from the past (the great time machine we call the Internet). In effect, such technologies are a wish fulfillment compensating for the failure to achieve the psychic powers Rhine seemed to guarantee.

The “metaverse” refers originally to Neil Stephenson's cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* (1992) describing a complex virtual world occupied by the avatars of individuals who interact in a realistic environment. A science fiction trope frequently used as a device to cast suspicion on reality as imminent, it has also been invoked as a critique of technology and the construction of simulated environments. Pugen has inverted the paradigmatic metaverse in *Bridge*

Kids by removing the gap between the “real world” and simulated spaces, constructing a parallel situation in which technologies of the virtual are embedded within the world without the interfaces, screens, and keyboards we have become accustomed to. Instead, access to this parallel “reality” occurs through psychic intuition.

For example, the treehouse where the lead character Kathy brings her new best-friend Kent, functions as a kind of portal, not entirely unlike the Internet, providing access to information and even to the belongings of Julia Denzig. While experimenting with Zener cards (a system of cards inscribed with symbols for the testing of ESP) with other students in her class, Kathy becomes aware of Kent's location remotely (signaled by a flash of her sitting on a swing), causing her to approach her classmate. In addition, the images of J.B. Rhine projected in the students' classroom never derive from any particular apparatus but from the students' psychic powers.

This process of embedding the real into virtual spaces is also manifested in Pugen's use of an Amazonite rock encased in a plastic cube that appears throughout the videos. Portrayed in some new age literature as increasing the psychic and clairvoyant abilities of those who possess it, the Amazonite rock is a potent metaphor in *Bridge Kids* for the encroachment of technology and virtuality into all facets of human life, isolating us until we are only a remnant of the natural world, embedded in virtual worlds of our own creation. The Amazonite rock is also a metaphor that extends to much of the installation: the CGI mask superimposed over the image of the sea, the character of Julia Denzig embedded in the history of J.B. Rhine, the virtual interfaces within the



Geoffrey Pugen, still from *Bridge Kids*, 2010

world of the film *Bridge Kids*, and ultimately, Pugen asserts, the context of the gallery itself as an artificial space sealed off from the outside world.

Despite its archetypal themes, the narrative of *Bridge Kids* is an exploration of how individuals interact through technology and its subtle integration into our daily lives. After Kathy reveals the artifacts of Denzig's life to Kent in the treehouse, Kent steals the Amazonite rock and promptly leaves her friend to observe its power alone in the forest. The stealing of the rock not only takes Kathy's psychic link away but also invokes jealousy, seeing Kent in psychic congress with Julia Denzig.

Kathy is further exposed when Kent leads other students in their class to her treehouse. The climax, in which Kent seems to suffer Kathy's wrath, produces an ambiguous catharsis for both. In this moment, the unconscious Kent experiences a vision expressed through abstruse images compiled by Pugen from found footage—images of women who helplessly tread water in the ocean, waves crashing against a cliff, and black clouds swallowing the sky. Some of these images appear in the classroom film on J.B. Rhine at the very moment he proclaims that parapsychology proves “that there's something that man can do that extends beyond space-time...a new world.” Despite its ambiguity, Pugen has described the vision as an image of transfiguration and becoming, perhaps by creating a shift in the present through a premonition of the future. While the vision appears to occur in the mind of the unconscious Kent, it is Kathy who wakes up from this hallucination and destroys both the treehouse and the amazonite rock. Depending on how one understands the rock (as bequeathing psychic power,

as a communication technology, or as a reminder of our potentially malignant isolation from nature), its destruction might well be either transfiguring or apocalyptic.

Despite the ostensible lack of dystopian clichés in Pugen's future world, there are few more horrifying thoughts than that of a people so cut off from the past that they rely on the television and film of the 20th century to comprehend human history. This horror becomes manifest in Pugen's short video *The Rhine Experiments*, which details the fictional romantic entanglements of J.B. Rhine and his psychic student Julia Denzig in the form of a 1990s soap opera. While Pugen has asserted an alternate history in which Julia Denzig exists as one of J.B. Rhine's psychic test subjects, he has also created a false-alternate history. Using the Denzig/Rhine, student/teacher relationship, Pugen shows how forms like the soap opera elaborate, invent, and ultimately falsify history to accommodate narrative.

Though Pugen never explicitly introduces the soap opera within the primary narrative of the video *Bridge Kids*, it is alluded to when Kathy asks her friend Kent, “Have you ever thought of becoming older, like an adult?... I want to be a lady, like from an old movie.” This interest in transformation and becoming might explain Kathy's fetish for Denzig, likely derived from the only film footage she could locate depicting her—the falsified history of *The Rhine Experiments*.

Pugen reconstitutes the rhetoric of the daytime melodrama with a characteristic still image montage and typical television studio camera set-ups, though he has carefully disrupted its formal rigidity by reversing the theme song from *The Young and the Restless* and through layered editing. Cryptic in its message, the soap opera only drops



Geoffrey Pugen, still from *Bridge Kids*, 2010

clues to the central film, *Bridge Kids* – the amazonite rock encased in a plastic cube, diagrams from ESP research and spiritualist imagery, and yet another avatar of Julia Denzig (played with an arrestingly stoic intensity by Sarah Weis).

Underlying the pseudo-scientific academic disciplines and the complex embedding of digital technologies into an analog world, is the moment when Geoffrey Pugen invents Julia Denzig. The question stands, what is the purpose of creating Denzig? Is the act of creating multiple manifestations that traverse space and time an attempt to will Denzig into existence? Is this some form of incantation, an act of fabricated authenticity? Pugen suggests that his invention of Denzig is tied to the desire to use make someone real through the virtual realm. In other words, Pugen is attempting to fabricate aura by anchoring a created personage in mediated history. This operation offers an alternative to the destruction of aura usually caused by technologies of reproduction. This possibility is of course, a double-edged sword.

Pugen's invention wrests on the capacity for representative

regimes to blur lines between fiction and fact, highlighting how technologies of representation might become devices for ideological control through historical engineering. As the party members in Orwell's *1984* remark, "who controls the present controls the past: who controls the past controls the future."⁴ However, Pugen also offers a more optimistic view, reflecting the belief that technologies of reproduction, so often described for their destruction of the aura of objects, might also create powerful auratic registers. In no small way Pugen behaves here like Doctor Frankenstein, harnessing the energy of technologies of representation in order to bring life to the non-existent, an operation performed by manufacturing the real through the networks of images and sounds that comprise the installation. Ultimately this activity betrays Pugen's use of technologies as a form of intuition (an activity analogous to the psychic students' attempts to invoke Julia Denzig), reinscribing the world with aura through the technologies so often decried for its removal.

Endnotes

¹ Rhine's experiments typically noted occurrences where test-subjects guessed Zener cards above the rate of chance. Skeptics have pointed out that the flaws in this methodology, described as *The Psi Assumption*: "Any such statistically significant departure is viewed as an 'anomaly' relating to psi, and thus is viewed as support for the Psi hypothesis. However statistical significance tells us nothing about causality." Alcock, J. E. et al. *Psi Wars: Getting to Grips with the Paranormal*.

² Kress, Kenneth A. "Parapsychology In Intelligence: A Personal Review and Conclusions. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*. (Vol. 13, No. 1), pp. 69-85, 1999: 69. Originally released by the CIA Historical Review Program, 1994: 78.

³ Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*. New York: Random House, 1994: 194.

⁴ Orwell, George. *1984*. New York: Signet Classics, 1961: 35.

With theatrical absurdity, **Geoffrey Pugen** explores the relationship between performance and the artificial, the natural and the virtual, through altering and manipulating media. Working with video, film, and photography in the digital realm, Pugen renders situations that examine our perceptions of how history, documentation, and simulation intersect. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally in places such as Transmediale 05, Berlin; Scope New York Art Fair 09; Australia International Digital Art Awards, Melbourne (2004); Poland 12th International Media Art Biennale WRO 07, Wroclaw; Signal and Noise Media Art Festival 09, Vancouver; Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art, Toronto; and England Moves 08 Festival, Manchester. Pugen is represented by Angell Gallery in Toronto.

Eli Horwatt is a Ph.D. Candidate at York University studying appropriation, found footage and conceptual art practices in the Cinema and Media Studies department. His writings on remixing, machinima and its use in experimental video may be found in *Cineaction Magazine* and *Scope Film Journal*. Currently he is writing on happenings, readymade films and videos and the reification of remixing aesthetics.

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56 Ossington Avenue, Toronto ON M6J 2Y7
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