

GETTING IN ON THE ACT:

List of Works

1. **'Dressed to Paint' 1994**

Eight 36 x 24" C-41 Prints

2. **'Nostalgia' 1995**

VHS Video

3. **'The Fitting' 1996-1998**

Four 93 x 72" B/W photographs on MDF

One 64 x 34" B/W photograph on MDF

One 64 x 24" B/W photograph on MDF

Three 3 x 2' mirrors, red fabric & Dr. Marten boot

4. **'Before/After' 1997**

Domestic armchair & table

Four domestic size C-41 photographs,

Audio loop-tape, Walkman, Two Speakers

5. **'Member of the Wedding' 1998**

SVHS Video Projection

6. **'Detecting Ghosts' 1998**

Electronic sound unit with Pressure Mat

Nichola Cecelia Bird

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of PhD
University of Leeds
Department of Fine Art
September 1998

GETTING IN ON THE ACT:

List of Catalogues

1. **'Dressed to Paint' 1994**

Essay by Joanne Morra

Self Published

2. **'Haunting Houses' 1998**

Essay by Elsa Chen

Edited by Lynn Turner & Chris Taylor

Published by the Wild Pansy Press

ISBN 1 900687 06 2

3. **'Red Herrings' 1998**

Edited by Corinne Miller & Chris Taylor

Published by Leeds Museums & Galleries

ISBN 1 901981 65 6

4. **'Red Herrings' CD-ROM 1998**

Programmed by Titus Bicknell

Published by Pink Ink.

Nichola Cecelia Bird

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of PhD
University of Leeds
Department of Fine Art
September 1998

GETTING IN ON THE ACT:

Critical Reflections on 'The Fitting' 1996-1998

'The Fitting' was an outcome of a long conceptual struggle. This involved a reconfiguration of my former preoccupations with the theme of masquerade and movie stars, with particular attention to the role of the found photograph. The sense of struggle never left 'The Fitting' – its production and eventual exhibition spanning over two years. Although the earliest body of work in the PhD, and effectively completed in 1997, 'The Fitting' was not shown until the end of 1998, in *the Year of Photography and Digital Image* hosted by Yorkshire.

This was a year too late.

Although its exhibition programming was beyond my control, and this was a factor in the final installation of 'The Fitting' being over-worked, this mistake was not due entirely to curation. The place of the viewer remained highly unresolved and imprecise, while other aspects of 'The Fitting', particularly the use of objects such as mirrors, red fabric and Dr. Marten boots were too literal, the juxtaposition of photographic images and props being too theatrical. Looking back at the evolution of this work in the video dossier, the process of 'The Fitting', rather than its exhibition, was in the long run far more interesting than the final outcomes. For example, in the 1996 open studio, the viewer's relationship to the process of 'detection,' which included the evidence of reconstruction and re-enactment, was much more live and 'playful', compared to the final installations of 1998.

Nichola Cecelia Bird

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of PhD
University of Leeds
Department of Fine Art
September 1998

GETTING IN ON THE ACT:

Critical Reflections on 'Before/After' 1997

While the research period for 'Before/After' was a year long, the production of the piece was not embarked on until four months before its eventual exhibition. This was the first work in the PhD to incorporate sound, which was installed into a domestic armchair. The place of the viewer, in relation to both the sound and the photographs, was therefore clearly resolved from the beginning.

'Before/After' was made for the show *A Company of Strangers* at the Leeds Metropolitan Gallery. Although the furniture and the size of the photographs connoted the 'domestic,' it was created for the gallery. The soundtrack of a man asking questions was set at a low level so the viewer/participant would have sit in the chair and listen. This could not be heard on the opening night, but for the remainder of the show, audience response and interpretation of the piece, was very productive. (This was despite the overall hostility to *A Company of Strangers*, in which responses to the artworks became polarised around the work by the two of most well known names in the show, and the debate about class and feminism.)

As my first experimentation into sound, 'Before/After' has some technical shortfalls, with the use of audio loop-tape now being 'outmoded.' It has also been a very difficult piece to translate into documentation and this has still not been satisfactorily resolved, forcing the viewer into the fixed position of interrogator when the actual piece operates in a more much ambiguous way.

Nichola Cecelia Bird

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of PhD
University of Leeds
Department of Fine Art
September 1998

GETTING IN ON THE ACT:

Critical Reflections on 'Member of the Wedding' 1998

This was a decisive work for a number of other reasons; there was a clear relationship between the position of a figure in the original photograph, the video camera filming from their point-of-view and the final projection piece placing the viewer in this position. Ambient sound was also used to simulate the experience of 'the maid' in the original photograph.

'Member of the Wedding' was an economical artwork, although labour intensive, involving actors, location work and camera crew. The decision to use 'time based media' and the photograph's original location meant that the work had to be tightly organised on both conceptual and practical levels. 'Member of the Wedding' was shot in both 16mm and SVHS, with the intention of retaining the photographic quality during projection. However this proved technically difficult, so SVHS was used, although in the event even SVHS projection was only possible on the opening night of *Haunting Houses*. 'Member of the Wedding' was then shown on a TV monitor, alongside Lotherton Hall's own promotional video, and was somewhat compromised. An important component of the projected piece was lost, where one of the actors is life-size, so the contemporary viewer looks over the wedding guest's shoulder and comes to occupy the space of 'the maid' in the original photograph. This photograph was cropped into a series of stills, rather than using the familiar style of rostrum photography associated with TV, which is often a seamless movement that leads the viewer knowingly to the main point of the photograph. Some viewers therefore found this de-familiarisation uncomfortable viewing.

Nichola Cecelia Bird

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of PhD
University of Leeds
Department of Fine Art
September 1998

GETTING IN ON THE ACT:

Critical Reflections on 'Detecting Ghosts' 1998

This was a new departure working with sound and interactive technology in a site-specific location. For 'Detecting Ghosts' to be successful, it was paramount that the piece was precise, both in terms of sound quality and its relationship to the participant. It had to reproduce the convincing sound of someone knocking at Lady Gascoigne's bedroom door when a visitor entered in the room, and provoke the impulse to say "come in".

Two things determined the brief and transitory nature of 'Detecting Ghosts:' firstly, my observations of how audiences behaved with artists' sound-pieces in the gallery context (once the interactive mechanisms are discovered, the work is quickly deconstructed by the audience who trigger them off over and over again). Secondly, the site of Lotherton Hall itself, the way the visitors were channelled around the house and how this erased the House's history of domestic service.

This led to the decision that only particular visitors would trigger the sound piece at certain intervals. This inevitably frustrated some of the audience, who searched for 'Detecting Ghosts' but could not find it. However this was a risk worth taking: the brevity of the piece and it being heard only at particular moments was in keeping with the theme of being 'haunted.' However 'Detecting Ghosts' may have been too subtle to be an 'intervention,' since Lotherton Hall is not a gallery, but a form of theatre whose 'visitors' come to consume a long gone upper middle-class way of life.

Nichola Cecelia Bird

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of PhD
University of Leeds
Department of Fine Art
September 1998