I am looking at social interactions between human and artificial agents within an art installation context. In my most recent installation UCBM (You could be me), 1999, the constructed, electronically-driven environment functions as a non-human entity in interaction with human viewers. I am interested in the issue of what kind of "personality" this environment needs so as to elicit the audience's empathy, understanding and participation. My aim, if there is one that stands out among several, is to shape the environment so as to engage the agency of the viewer. Paradoxically, supercharging the chain of events and overloading viewers with perceptual input and even possible interpretations can, I think, make them more aware of themselves and their individualized roles in the work.

UCBM explores the implications of artificial empathy and artificial intimacy by portraying these through highly mediated communication. Empathy is personified through an entity portrayed on video in a lab, who assumes the role of questioner. Her personality is that of an intensely self-absorbed persona but funny too. She asks viewers about their feelings of comfort and intimacy in the setup, the latter being elicited through a staged sequences of images that suggest webcam exposure to someone's private space. These strategies pose to the viewer the question of whether artificial communications constitute social interaction, or in their simulation of human exchange, demonstrate social mechanisms that have been altered by non-human agency. In my installations I am interested in building working models of human/non-human exchange that allow viewers to be conscious of their own role in constructing that exchange and adapting to its conditions.

UCBM, in brief, is an interactive video installation in which viewers experience a "test" of their adaptation to artificiality. The speaking female shown in the video projection is my surrogate in the setup. Her script revolves around ironic scientific and theoretical commentary, and she also solicits from viewers as much input and intimacy as she can get. A genetic algorithm (GA) is used as the method for assessing viewers' "empathy factor". The GA takes a viewer’s empathy score, derived from their speed of approach to the projection screen and from their answers to three questions via touch input, and calculates it as a set of genes that mutate and crossover to form offspring. Viewers with adaptive offspring pass their genes into the gene pool that subsequent viewers interact with. In this way the "recombinant" computation of the GA links together a population of nine viewers before resetting. Each viewer is given feedback on how they did through voice, a light display, and a fitness chart.

In UCBM, the narratives of social understanding are based on a common usage of the term empathy. They are driven forward by the questioner, and by the computational mechanism built into the system for rating viewers. UCBM is a sorting device, an abstract probe head to quote Manuel De Landa: it evolves a search space from the way that humans interact with it, implementing the GA to breed multiple possible solutions which are constrained or sorted by the fitness function of "high empathy". Viewers feel at the mercy of the questioner sporting her lab coat, and of the dense visual and verbal information they are fed. But the interpretation of their own experience that they are given is so overdetermined that they inevitably fall back on awareness of their own role and recognize their construction of narrative. The intention in foregrounding simulated empathy is not to advocate more mediated or artificial relations with other humans. Rather, it is to create an art experience that is aligned with the a-life goal of embodying technoscientific knowledge and recognizing its narrative dimensions.

Within the intellectual history of a-life there are ideas that link together the research and artistic approaches involved in my practice. I recently came across a collection of papers from twenty years ago on sociocybernetics research, or the application of cybernetics theory to social systems. In the seventies this was part of the "new cybernetics" that was not only extending systems theory to non-physical systems, but was developing an epistemological position of observer-dependence in all forms of knowledge undertaking, including science: the proposition that information is both out there and in the imagination, interacting in feedback and feedforward.
loops; the idea that a participant in research may act conditionally as an external observer, moving between positions. We may now be familiar with some of this thinking in relation to the sciences, through culturally situated philosophers and theoreticians of science. But the proposition that a point of view is always provisional, that a human is never in a single place of outlook or enunciation, I think is still a rather marginal position in the sciences.

My perhaps utopic idea is that the visibility of artists aligned with a-life researchers can shift the scientific worldview further in the direction of observer dependence. At the same time, this intellectual collaboration could accentuate the art space as an immersive and relational social space. Interaction with observers is, after all, key to what artists do. In my installation environments, I try to generate a sense of multi-layered meaning not for its own sake but so as to indicate to the audience a realistic correspondence with social complexity. As source material, I will continue to study a-life agents in interactive space, where features of artificiality and humanness cross over, and also genetic algorithms for generating a social collective (i.e. breeding a population) and for tracking and giving feedback to viewers.