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onscreen - media art

2004: unexpected innovations

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Monika Tichacek, The Shadowers
courtesy the artist

Art exhibitions come and go. Some are remembered and achieve iconic status while others vanish into anonymity. The year 2004 will be memorable for the confluence of 2 blockbuster exhibitions that, in their own way, promised glimpses of what contemporary art is all about. The 2004 Biennale of Sydney and 2004: Australian Culture Now were virtually in sync and apparently in competition as well, each striving to outdo the other in terms of being 'contemporary.' The Biennale of Sydney presented the "best of contemporary international and Australian art", art "about today... about everything that is happening and shaping our lives." 2004 offered a "snapshot of the most exciting things happening in Australian art today", "a spectacular survey of work at the edge of current artistic practice." In drawing attention to the coincidence of these 2 exhibitions I want to highlight the priority that both invested in innovative artistic practice, and the perception that to be really contemporary is to be, in jazz argot, "something else"; spectacular, groundbreaking.

From the point of view of digital media arts, the Biennale of Sydney was a huge disappointment. If you went there specifically looking for the stuff you would have to conclude that it is no longer on the agenda. Apart from a number of interactive works by Mario Rizzi (The Sofa of Jung) and Catherine Richards (I was scared to death/I could have died of joy), the Biennale seems to have forgotten that media art is a focal index of the effect that digital technologies have in shaping our lives.

What of 2004: Australian Culture Now? The exhibition declared its innovative nature from the outset. For starters, it was an ambitious collaborative venture, 2 years in the making, between the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and the Ian Potter Centre of the National Gallery of Victoria. In contrast to the Biennale of Sydney, digital media was placed prominently on the exhibition's map of emerging trends in Australian video, television, painting, networked media, sculpture, installation, photography, craft, design and fashion. Indeed, the spectacular Federation Square atrium that separates the Ian Potter Centre and ACMI could be regarded as a symbol of the complex and vibrant convergences taking place within contemporary Australian art. Senior NGV curator

convergences taking place within contemporary Australian art. Senior NGV curator Charles Green drew specific attention to this in his catalogue essay, describing the fluency and openness of the boundaries between previously discrete forms such as cinema, architecture, painting and the internet. This convergence was also cannily reflected in the organisation of the exhibition around broad categories such as image, fashion, object and installation. Furthermore, the accompanying website cross-referenced different artists' works across categories, reinforcing the blurring of formal boundaries so central to the entire exhibition. Screen-based media art and painting might not occupy the same physical space, but in 2004 they certainly occupy the same conceptual space, in conversation with, and informing, one another. Moreover, as Green astutely observes, ACMI's foregrounding of interactive and time-based screen arts strategically heightens their curatorial place, in contrast to most art institutions where they are relegated to "the same peripheral spaces allocated during the 1970s to video."

Although the role of digital media and its associated art forms was prioritised in the curatorial vision of 2004, the highlighting of convergence was not without contradictions and qualifications. There is a strong sense in the promotional literature produced by the NGV that while important conversations are clearly taking place between the visual arts and 'new media', we are also witnessing a resurgence of traditional forms. It is painting, not the moving image, that is "moving back towards centre stage", situating itself "as a reference point for other media."

One prominent didactic panel at the entrance to the NGV component of 2004 declared, somewhat sulkily, that as a result of "years of digitised technological change" art hasn't been defined in recent times by its traditional, eponymous forms such as painting and sculpture. Consequently, traditional forms have had to re-define and re-invent themselves through overlaps with the likes of new cinema forms, games and web authoring. This sentiment seems to contradict the 2004 vision of generating a new kind of work that transcends the old divisions between digital and more traditional 'analogue' forms of art. Parochialism never dies. Perhaps the removal of Christopher Langton's triumphal bubble arch, installed as a kind of unifying membrane in the atrium for the exhibition launch, is suggestive of an historical divide in the arts that even 2004 couldn't hope to resolve. And the principal corporate sponsor had such high hopes for the exhibition: "It will change art...and everyone near the cutting-edge will be affected." Pity if you don't live near the cutting edge.

Not to conceal my own parochialism, it was in the ACMI component of 2004 that I encountered 2 works that stood out as innovative. Unfortunately neither Monika Tichacek's *The Shadows* (2004) nor Philip Brophy's *The Body Malleable* (2002-2004) evidenced the intermedia "creolisation" celebrated in the catalogue, nor did they represent the coming into the world of a hybrid, as yet unnamed contemporary art form spawned from encounters between unlikely things. While it must be conceded that both these works attracted the carping kind of "your taxes paid for this" diatribe often meted out to contemporary art, neither could compete in the moral outrage stakes with Nat and Ali's not only but also, *honk for art* (2004) installation at the NGV. This work of excessive scrapbook ephemera, which covered entire walls, was an extravagant exploration of what is and isn't topical in contemporary art. However, it primarily received attention for its controversial and eventually censored slur on Ian Thorpe (from gay to gold icon with a single thumbtack).

Sydney-based artist Monika Tichacek's multi-channel video work *The Shadows* immediately caused a ruckus in terms of where it should go. Originally to be installed in the Screen Gallery with the rest of the ACMI component of 2004, it was eventually exhibited separately in the ACMI Studio and restricted to patrons over 18 years of age. *The Shadows* is an overwhelming experience virtually impossible to describe. Situated within its tight triangular arrangement of screens, I felt completely enveloped. Tichacek inventively exploited the proximity of the 3 screens to create a claustrophobic, audio-visual space of immersion. The sense of entrapment was a weird corollary of the bizarre role-playing scenarios depicted on the screens, involving 3 ambiguous characters and surreal procedures of bondage and confinement. Far from being erotic or sexualised, it was the abstraction of their interactions that made this work so beguiling and riveting. In this sense the least shocking aspect of *The Shadows* was the much-publicised tongue-nailing sequence. It was the meticulous, geometrical rigour with which elaborately artificial prosthetic connections of string, nails, jewels and saliva enmesh the protagonists that was totally engaging and disturbing: a dream logic worthy of Kafka on an absinthe binge. Loud, unnerving and visceral, yet strangely quiescent, *The Shadows* brought to mind remarks made about David Lynch's *Eraserhead* in 1977: "Ever have a dream while sleeping face down, with your mouth and nose buried in your pillow? In your discomfort you might have conjured up something that approximates *Eraserhead*."

Philip Brophy's *The Body Malleable* is the first work of media art to finally and emphatically tell it like it is: interacting with computers is a completely embodied experience. With its penetrative and very literal digital interface, *The Body Malleable* is an ironic and playful exploration of the human-computer interface that dares us to be squeamish ("The colon and its polysexual route to infinite Otherness beckons you"). The theme of the body malleable is a familiar one in Brophy's work, only here the transformations of vaginal and penile forms and sounds are in the hand, or rather finger, of the beholder. *The Body Malleable* is the kind of work many people, including myself, have been waiting for at ACMI. It is striking and memorable, pushing the possibilities of interaction beyond the familiar point and click interface associated with computer-based works. It is welcome and important in that it extends ACMI's curatorial history of presenting relatively safe and non-threatening work.

Whether we like it or not, we are required to physically relate to the work in a totally unprecedented, unfamiliar way: "You want to stick your finger in, but once you do, it gets messy." The more rigorous your attack on the beautifully sculptural, yet organically ambiguous interface (is this a vagina or a colon I see before me?), the more suggestive and palpable the transformations on screen, and the more stimulated the surround sound becomes. But make no mistake, Brophy isn't out to offend public taste, to shock or dramatically blot the contemporary arts map with a memorable success de scandale. It is the total indifference to either appeasing or transgressing aesthetic or moral codes that makes *The Body Malleable* stand out as an engaging and thoroughly worked over experience. When I went back to check it out prior to the closing of the show, that sphincter was well and truly spent. Another ruptured membrane in the 2004 experience. Spectacular.

2004: Australian Culture Now, Australian Centre for the Moving Image and National Gallery of Victoria, June 8-Sept 12; Biennale of Sydney, various venues, June 5-Aug

Darren Tofts' essay on media arts at the Biennale of Sydney is published in Artspace's Criticism+Engagement+ Thought, edited by Blair French, Adam Geczy and Nicholas Tsoutas. He is currently working on a book about Australian media arts to be published by Thames and Hudson.

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