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onscreen - media art

2004: glorious corporeality

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There is a persistent trope of disembodiment that frames many investigations into the impact of new media technologies on culture. When we sit in chat rooms or immerse ourselves in virtual worlds, our bodies are supposed to lapse into redundancy—meat, as William Gibson called it. Despite the aching necks and backs and chronic RSI suffered by those who engage heavily with computing technologies, this trope persistently surfaces. So it was interesting to note that the body, in all its glorious corporeality, emerged as a loose theme binding the works exhibited as part of the ACMI Screen Gallery component of 2004: Australian Culture Now.

2004 was billed as “one of the most ambitious surveys of contemporary Australian art and culture in recent history.” The Screen Gallery component of the exhibition was made up of 9 works curated by Alexie Glass. There was, however, some overlap with the Networked component of the exhibition, curated by Melinda Rackham and featuring 22 works, ranging from Flash animations through to websites for online communities such as Empyre and Fibreculture.

Despite being a survey show, the works specifically curated for the Screen Gallery all manifest an interest in some part of the body or bodies. It's hard to say whether this was a curatorial preference or a sign of some kind of emerging trend in new media arts. Nevertheless, gendered bodies, ephemeral bodies and malleable bodies all made their presence felt.

behind the mountain (2004) by Darren Dale, Jonathan Jones and David Page focuses on the colonisation of Indigenous bodies by early white settlers in Australia. Drawing its title from Truganini's poignant plea to be buried behind the mountain rather than have her remains distributed to European museums, as happened to many of her people, the work serves as a reminder of the brutality that thousands of Indigenous Australians endured at the hands of colonial governments. Even after death, their bodies were forced to succumb to the rule of the European invaders, their graves robbed and their remains removed without permission so as to be bought and sold for exhibition and experimentation. The work consists of 6 short films projected into 6 cardboard boxes laid out on the gallery floor. Each film shows a body, shot so as to appear contained and constrained by the box. The bodies are naked, silent and vulnerable. It is a quiet, thoughtful work that eloquently evokes a sorry past.

While behind the mountain positions the viewer as a spectator of the captive body, Alex Davies' Swarm (2003) captures spectators and incorporates them into the work. As viewers move into the installation space, their image is tracked, captured and projected back to them on the screen. The captured image data is stored in a

database and re-emerges to create an evolving mediascape. Gnostically traces or past visitors join with viewers currently in the space, at times leading to swarms of activity. The visual activity is linked to a soundtrack which swells to fill the space or recedes to silence, depending on the activity on screen. Swarm reminds us of the public nature of our bodies in an age of surveillance.

Despite the work being contingent on the physical presence of participants, Swarm asks very little of that presence. Philip Brophy's *The Body Malleable*, in contrast, demands that we use our bodies, or rather our fingers, in a far more active way. The interface consists of an orb about the size of a bowling bowl in front of a screen. Putting your fingers into the orifice of the orb produces changes in the animation on the screen in front of you. The faster you move your fingers in and out of the orifice, the greater the changes produced (there was a term for it when I was in high school but I won't use it here). The animation itself is a playful commentary on the mutability of gender. Some finger thrusts produce a mutating penile form while others a similarly mobile vagina. In Brophy's words, "The penile and the vaginal roll and flutter like a series of hot flushes but they are degendered by their incessant drive to become the other...The colon and its polysexual route to infinite Otherness beckons you. There is no turning back once the body becomes malleable."

Malleable bodies also feature strongly in the work of Sydney-based collective the Kingpins. In *Dark Side of the Mall* (2004), they continue their exploration of performance-based interventions into public and popular spaces. The work, which taps into the aesthetics of the rock video, the shopping mall and drag, is made up of a series of videos projected onto 3 screens, set to The Angels' tune *Am I Ever Gonna See Your Face Again?*. The screens force the viewer to move between disparate scenes featuring pirates in a car park (strangely reminiscent of *West Side Story*) and teenage beauty queens in a faux classical shopping mall. This amplifies the sense of disjuncture created within the scenes themselves. Given how little we've seen of the Kingpins in Melbourne, I think the inclusion of some of their earlier works may have helped provide a stronger context for this piece.

Other works included in the ACMI Screen Gallery were Troy Innocent's *lifeSigns* (2004), which continues the artist's always interesting probes into the nature of language and iconography; Symbiotica's *MEART: the semi-living artist* (2001); Shaun Gladwell's *godspeed verticals* (2004); David Rosetzky's *Maniac de Luxe* (2004) and the much discussed work by Monika Tichacek, *The Shadows* (2004). The only worrying aspect of the show was the absence of artists from outside Sydney or Melbourne, and the retreat into a strong emphasis on video/cinematic works after what I felt was a positive move by ACMI in last year's *Transfigure* exhibition towards media art installations.

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