It’s not unusual, while strolling around the arts precinct at Southbank in Melbourne, to be assaulted by the sometimes ear-shattering efforts of aspirant divas. Many of the students from the nearby Victorian College of the Arts use the tourist precinct as a place to busk their wares in exchange for much needed public funding. However, when the sounds are found to emanate from a businessman with a briefcase attempting to shatter the various objects of Stephen Barrass’ Op Shop installation by singing in a public place, it is surprising, and delightful.

Barrass’ installation is part of the Experimenta’s Prototype exhibition featuring 13 predominantly Australian, new media installations and digital works along with 6 short videos and animations displayed on a DVD jukebox. A richly eclectic collection, the exhibition itself exceeds the categorisation implied by its title. The term ‘prototype’ seems to suggest that these works represent a mere stage along the way to a more justifiable (and scientific) ‘somewhere else.’ But this is more a function of the necessity of framing funding applications for exhibitions in terms of the greater good. As Ian Haig argues (p5), there is an inherent danger in badging and validating new media art within the discursive frameworks of science and technology. To be fair to Experimenta, though, one can only imagine with what consternation a funding application would be met if it claimed to be setting out to exhibit works that are, as Haig prefers, quirky, perverse, weird and very good fun!

But this is precisely the territory that Prototype explores. Take, for example, the ultra-cool installation Burn Out 200—Part II The Game. Ben Morieson’s Daytona-inspired installation is the continuation of a performance project that began with a
spectacular event held at Melbourne’s Docklands in which local drag racers, choreographed by the artist, created a drawing in burnt rubber that was then photographed aerially. In Part II–The Game, participants sit in a car console, familiar to anyone who has played car racing games at Timezone, and can select 3 cars with which to do burnouts. The pictures created by the user are then archived (for possible inclusion in the artist’s gallery) and are printed at the rear of the console for the user to take with them. Morieson’s argument that “the game mimics the rhetoric of super-charged emotion and spontaneity associated with modernist painting” may have been lost on the queues of young guys lining up to have a go but it certainly didn’t detract from their obvious enthusiasm for the work.

Barrass’ Op Shop was also popular. Using a microphone placed in front of a video-projected virtual environment that depicts floor to ceiling bric-a-brac, participants are invited to use their voices to smash the objects on the screen. While I was there, a small crowd formed around the microphone and there was some competition to see who could cause the most damage. Each new breakage was met with cheers and high 5s all round. You gotta admire an artwork that makes people feel like that.

Finished with testing your driving skills or your vocal range, you can try to get a couple of uppity Canadian girls to invite you to a party. Talk Nice, by Canadian artist Elizabeth Vander Zaag, uses Speak and Yell (SAY) software to analyse the pitch of user’s voice as they engage in conversation with 2 onscreen teenagers who attempt to teach the user to ‘talk nice.’ Talking nice means mimicking their Valley Girl intonations and phrasings as they run you through a series of questions like, “If you were offered drugs at a party, what would you do?” Astute 12-year-old participant Lucy was promptly issued an invitation when she responded, “I’d ask you what to do”. The invitation, however, was subsequently withdrawn when Lucy refused to ignore someone who wasn’t part of the girls’ social set. I felt like I was back in high school! Incidentally, despite numerous attempts, I never cracked it for an invite.

The in-ya-face interactions of these exhibits contrasts nicely with works like Richard Brown’s Mimetic Starfish, Chris Henschke’s Tonal Field Navigator, Jane Crappsley’s Untitled Drawing in Space and Martin Walch’s Over Written, Under Written. Each of these continues the inventive use of interface that characterises many of the exhibits in Prototype, but in subtler ways. In Mimetic Starfish, for instance, the user caresses a projected starfish controlled by neural net technology and gesture sensing, and the starfish responds to the speed and force of the user’s interaction by extending or withdrawing its tentacles. Henschke’s Tonal Field Navigator rewards the user’s intervention, through the placement of their hand in a projected hologram, with a shifting, immersive visual and aural landscape.

That’s if you can get the sound of screaming rabbits out of your ears! The squeals that emanate from Pet Sounds, by Isobel Knowles and Haima Marriot, come from 2 seemingly innocuous stuffed rabbits. As you squeeze the adorable little animals, they emit strangely synthetic yowling noises. The more you hug and squeeze them, the more they howl. It sounds as though you are causing them great anguish but it is really hard to stop doing it. It’s like being at a perverse kind of petting farm.

There are other works, like Iain Mott and Marc Raszewski’s Sound Mapping installation, Simon Norton’s Testimony: A Story Machine, Bruce Mowson’s Flesh Antenna and a number of videos and animations that deserve to be mentioned but...
Antenna and a number of videos and animations that deserve to be mentioned but space doesn’t permit. What should be said, however, is that it’s gratifying to see such a breadth and scope in these works, such a sense of playfulness and joyousness. If works like these can be produced and brought together in exhibitions like Prototype under a funding regime oppressed by the short sighted and utilitarian policies of the current Federal Government, then there really is hope for a vision of new media arts that is more than worthy; it’s actually fun!

Experimenta, Prototype, Interact 2002 Asia Pacific Multimedia Festival, BlackBox, Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne, Sept 5-21

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RealTime issue #51 Oct-Nov 2002 pg. 15

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