

LEFT: EMERGENCY EXIT 2003: NAOTO FUKASAWA
 MAIN IMAGE: IMMERSION 2007: ANGELA BARNETT,
 ANDREW BUCHANAN, DARREN BALLINGAL,
 CHRIS MACKELLAR, CHRISTIAN RUBINO
 IMAGE ANDREW LLOYD



techno play

BY PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF TECHNOLOGY, MEDIA ART HAS OFTEN BEEN CRITICISED FOR PURSUING THE TECHNOLOGICAL WOW FACTOR OVER ARTISTIC CONCEPTS AND CREATIVITY RESULTING IN WORKS THAT CAN BE SOMEWHAT ESOTERIC AND INACCESSIBLE. BUT FOR 21 YEARS EXPERIMENTA HAS BEEN BREAKING DOWN THESE BARRIERS BY PROMOTING THE WORKS OF LEADING DIGITAL AND NEW MEDIA ARTISTS IN AUSTRALIA THROUGH CURATING AND SUPPORTING A RANGE OF BIENNIAL EXHIBITIONS. IN ITS LATEST EXHIBITION *PLAYGROUND*, IT SHOWCASES THE INNOVATIVE AND IMAGINATIVE WORKS OF AUSTRALIAN AND INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS WHOSE ARTWORKS COMBINE TECHNOLOGY, ARTISTIC INTENT AND AESTHETICS IN EQUAL PARTS. AS **MARK CALDERWOOD** FOUND, IT PROVIDES A VERY PLAYFUL AND ACCESSIBLE ENTRY INTO THE WORLD OF MEDIA ART.

If you visit enough visual art exhibitions, they often tend to blur together as the experience of one follows a similar path to the previous. You enter a gallery, look at a static display on the wall or video screen and maybe read some dry intellectual commentary. Even if it is the 'new' media of video or installation, at the end of it all, the engagement with the art often tends to be kept at a distance.

But today's gallery visitor increasingly expects more than this kind of passive interaction. However, while our lives are awash in increasingly advanced and responsive technologies, old habits can die hard and mainstream art still shows a lingering distrust of technology's potential to reshape the ways that we express and experience art. The pious critical hype surrounding media art – video, digital and multimedia – hasn't helped with its ringing proclamations of media as the revolution more often rendering it arcane and intimidating to all but the chosen few.

Making technology-based art accessible is a claim we've heard many times before, from so many exhibitions. Yet walking into *Experimenta Playground*, you quickly realise that this one is the genuine article.





The latest in a series of biennial media art events staged by Melbourne's Experimenta, *Playground* seamlessly melds art and technology in works by over 40 Australian and international artists. With the emphasis being not so much on the works' technical aspects as their direct engagement with the viewer, *Experimenta Playground* successfully extends and redefines the nature of interactivity with a widely varied audience.

Experimenta Playground neatly sidesteps elitism and technofear by appealing to something we all have in common, the formative experience of play. Playing is instinctive, something every one of us does as children and on into adulthood. It moves our bodies and kindles our delight as we interact with each other and a world full of wonders. Play connects us to the fertile ground of the unconscious; most of all, play fires our creativity and imagination, the very things that inspire the formidable and fantastic technologies behind *Playground's* artworks. New media comes of age and cheekily pushes us down the slippery dip.

The artworks that make up *Experimenta Playground* are affective spectacles: they move us in surprising, unexpected, unsettling and mysterious ways.

Many gleefully dislocate our usual perspectives, revealing the humour that lies beneath the everyday. In homage to cinematographer George Méliès, for example,

Israeli video artist Guy Ben-Ner's kitchen becomes an enchanted dress-up game in Moby Dick, with a table for his seafaring clipper, and a potted plant as a jungle island. Elsewhere, Naoto Fukasawa's *Emergency Exit* sign unexpectedly catches the corner of our eye as its familiar pictogram springs impishly to life, dancing, running, chasing its wayward head, and sitting down for a rest.

Although the technology behind *Playground's* art works is exceedingly sophisticated, it is not their *raison*.

'We don't select or commission something because it's great technology', insists Liz Hughes, Experimenta's artistic director and *Playground's* co-curator, 'but because the idea behind the work is engaging, incisive and innovative. Some of the artists Experimenta exhibits use incredibly advanced technology, but they make it disappear. The concept that the technology brings to life, is what we're about.'

With the technology being made all but invisible, the artist's creativity in capturing our imagination and prompting a response is what comes to the fore. We're caught by the sheer ingenuity of Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss' kinetic sculpture from 1987 *Der Lauf Der Dinge (The Way Things Go)*, as tyres, planks, water bottles and homemade fireworks move in mesmerising cascades of cause and effect. We can't help but be moved to laughter by the antics of our own shadows in Philip

Worthington's *Shadow Monsters*, as they sprout horns and hair, teeth and tails, burping and grunting along with our movements.

Daniel Crooks' digital panorama *On Perspective and Motion Part II* disorients us to the point of queasiness, while the slow-motion poetry of Shaun Gladwell's *Guide to Recent Architecture: Fountains* produces a weightless feeling of somatic meditation.

Sensory immersion reaches new heights in *Playground's* interactive works, in ways that far transcend the button-pushing literalism of multimedia art back in the '80s. Interactive digital technology (run endearingly through an old-fashioned overhead projector) in Tmema's *The Manual Input Station* depends on touch and hand gestures to create dynamic visual effects. The glowing resin pods of *Charmed*, by Priscilla Bracks, Gavin Sade and Matt Dwyer, entice us to move them about, letting us peek into the miniature lives of the pods' animated inhabitants, and with just an omnipotent tap on the touch-sensitive screen, disrupt their routines and cause all manner of chaos.

Immersion offers a vibrant, literally immersive interactive experience, as digital deep sea creatures dart and dance beneath our feet. Specially commissioned for *Experimenta Playground*, *Immersion* is a collaborative work by five multimedia/film artists, 3D animators, a games technologist and sound engineer, all of whom studied together at RMIT. Submerged



in the projected ocean, animated jellyfish glow, electric eels writhe and spark, and jaunty seahorses toot an aquatic symphony in response to virtual contact with our shadow. That we so quickly and delightedly plunge in to interact via touch suggests that we aren't so physically disconnected as some might suggest in this age of digital disembodiment.

But don't think, for all its playful attitude, that *Experimenta Playground* is a lightweight show: serious concerns lurk beneath its shiny surface.

Help Your Self, Narinda Reeders' wry parody of an ATM kiosk, reveals the insecurities of our quick-fix society where convenience is taken to absurd levels. Smug corporate guru Lydia dispenses self-help advice that's neither convenient nor helpful, but personal and callously judgemental.

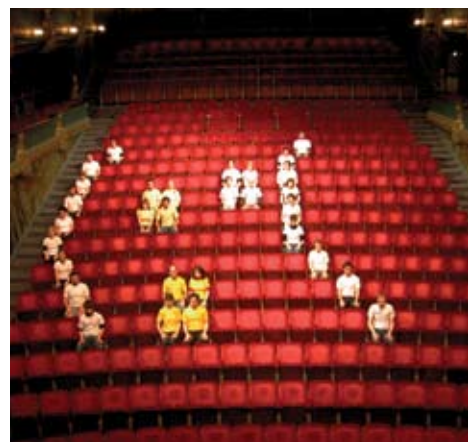
French/Taiwanese digital artist Shu Lea Cheang's *Baby Love* also goads our gnawing social anxiety. The enormous cloned babies, riding beside us in giant fairground teacups, croon and exchange pop songs uploaded to the installation from our own iPods. Beneath the cloying plastic kitsch simmers the apprehension that we are active participants in creating our own identically pre-packaged, randomly generated and emotionally impoverished future.

Even with their serious resonances, *Experimenta Playground's* works remain enchanting and accessible – the hallmark of Experimenta's exhibitions, which aim to attract more than just the gallery crowd.

'We want to hit all audiences,' Hughes says enthusiastically. 'We include pieces that everyone can relate to – kids, grandparents, people from the general public who aren't that much into art, as well as the aficionados and critics that expect a more high art context.'

'Our strategy is to have key works that provide an entry point, something approachable, delightful and usually tactile. We like to show art that takes something familiar and everyday, but gives it a twist. That hooks people in, and easily moves them on to works that might be more conceptually challenging. With the range of works at any given show, there'll be something that everyone can connect with.'

And judging by the crowds outside Melbourne Art Centre's BlackBox during *Playground's* opening week, or the number of repeat visitors towing family and friends, it seems they're on to something.



TOP : *SHADOW MONSTERS* 2005 : PHILIP WORTHINGTON
 IMAGE ANDREW LLOYD
 ABOVE : *GAME OVER PROJECT: PONG, SPACE INVADERS
 AND POLE POSITION* 2005-2007 : GUILLAUME REYMOND
 RIGHT : *BABY LOVE* 2005 : SHU LEA CHEANG
 IMAGE FLORIAN KLEINEFENN

Such universal appeal has been an elusive goal throughout technology-based art's chequered history. Early media art was plagued by the daunting prior knowledge needed of the technology involved, putting off a great many people. It was also characterised by an inflexible, either/or approach defined by the limits of the available computer and CD-ROM technology. But as media technology has changed and expanded over the ensuing two decades, so have the creative and aesthetic limits of the art it can produce.

Driving Australia's contemporary media arts to realise that potential is where Experimenta comes in. From humble beginnings in 1986 as an experimental film association, the organisation has come to occupy the dynamic intersection between creativity and technology. Riding at the vanguard of media-based art, Experimenta is committed to supporting artists that continually push the boundaries of what digital media, film, video, installation, performance and sound art can do.

Hughes doesn't see any point in replicating existing tech, or being tied to a pedestrian point-and-click experience.

'We want to take audiences beyond their everyday experience of technology,' she says.

Experimenta's artists go that much further, using cutting edge movement based and sensor technologies, innovative software, interactive animation and more, with experimental technologies feeding back into the mainstream and influencing future developments.

'Some technologies are only just coming onto the market, some are still emerging and even a little unstable at first,' she observes. 'But if it can bring an idea to life like nothing else, it's worth the risk!'

While some media art has reflected pop technology trends in gaming or peripherals (art works displayed on mobile phone screens, for instance), Experimenta takes a different tack. 'We prefer to create environments,' smiles Hughes, 'and we provide a space that people don't normally experience. They can let their guard down and be more receptive to something extraordinary and compelling.'

Watching people enter *Experimenta Playground's* cocoon-like atmosphere, she's quite right: within minutes, they've visibly relaxed, and are engaging with the works spontaneously and actively, grinning the entire time.

Experimenta's best and most innovative art is showcased in major biennial exhibitions, tightly themed around an aspect of technology's impact on our lives. *Experimenta Vanishing Point* in 2005 was a technological trip down the rabbit hole, replete with wonders and illusions that escaped the bounds of logic and exuberantly turned our perceptions completely upside-down. 2003 saw *Experimenta House of Tomorrow*, ruminations on what home and family might come to mean when saturated with mediacentric technologies and uneasy utopian virtual divergences, as the pace of social and technological change grows ever quicker.

Like its precursors, *Experimenta Playground* will tour to capital cities and regional centres around Australia over the next 18 months, promoting media art to as wide an audience as possible. *Experimenta House of Tomorrow* in particular broke audience records, attracting and entrancing over 160,000 people nationwide while

Experimenta Under the Radar toured to venues in the UK. As well as public art spaces, Experimenta's works can turn up in curious and unforeseen places. The undisputed star of *House of Tomorrow*, *ZiZi The Affectionate Couch* (part pampered pet, part chaise and part alien sea-slug that mews, wriggles and purrs ecstatically when stroked and sat on) created by Stephen Barrass, together with Narinda Reeders' *The Shy Picture* (a seemingly ordinary black and white photograph whose figures scurry and hide as you approach) nestled comfortably in the foyer of Melbourne's Sofitel hotel throughout September, surprising an entirely new audience.

The two years between exhibitions is also taken up with the demanding but exciting work of unearthing, sourcing and commissioning the most astonishing media art to be found, from both Australian and international artists. Aided by government arts sponsorship and, increasingly, private partners, Experimenta's initiatives ExperimentalLAB and New Visions Commissions support the development of media arts projects by the next generation of groundbreaking artists. Some of those featured in prior exhibitions have been propelled to careers of international prominence. As well as representing Australia in the 2007 Venice Biennale, video artist Shaun Gladwell, for example, has recently acquired the distinction of being the first Australian artist to have a media work- his 2000 *Storm Sequence* - auctioned at Sotheby's.

Technology is, undeniably, here to stay. But by stimulating us to touch, participate and interact (and not always in expected ways), *Experimenta Playground* moves us to step beyond our usual experience of it, prompting us to think about our relationship with technology and the powerful, resonant possibilities offered by its presence in art without the need to dumb it down. Though the technological basis of media art may have cowed us in the past, we realise that there's no reason for it to when it can unlock the curiosity, wonder and delighted surprise that even the most jaded and sombrely grown-up of us still harbour deep inside. Now, run along and play! [•]

www.experimenta.org

