

# the fruits of intervention

## bernadette ashley: emerge's screengrab, townsville

"THE MOTIVATION FOR SCRENGRAB WAS TO BRING THE WORLD HERE—TO BRING NEW MEDIA ARTS INTO THIS SPACE FOR STUDENTS TO SEE WHAT PEOPLE ARE PRODUCING, TO SEE THE POTENTIAL FOR THEIR OWN WORK, AND FOR THE PUBLIC TO UNDERSTAND AND INTERPRET NEW MEDIA ART."

Mitch Goodwin is a lecturer at James Cook University's School of Creative Arts in Townsville, and a member of the team convening eMerge Media Space, along with Elly Murrell, Richard Gillespie and, in Cairns, Russell Milledge.

The appellation 'new' can be applied to almost everything within reach of the conversation. SoCA is a recent convergence of the university's various visual arts, theatre and music strands under a creative arts umbrella. It is physically housed in a striking cluster of buildings barely a year old, and the inaugural Screengrab exhibition and prize celebrates the establishment of the eMerge Media Space, while flying the flag for SoCA's new direction: "A statement of intent", says Goodwin. "People think we've stopped making art, and we are debunking that myth."

Screengrab's theme, "Intervention", gave digital practitioners a broad concept to work with. "[It] can be a bit political and edgy, a word and concept relevant to 21st-century life. It can address issues like government control, but also the technological, social and personal. It's a standardisation of how we look to control things", Goodwin explains.

The selection panel considered 70 low-res entries from around the world, and narrowed the field to 15 finalists for the exhibition. "A whole range of people responded. Some entrants were very web savvy, others not at all; video artists for whom the computer is a secondary consideration, a tool for editing and dissemination." Goodwin's catalogue essay notes that, "Artists and programmers tackled the theme from a number of positions; some were technological interventions of the medium itself, while others placed notions of communication and exchange formats at the centre of their critique while others pursued directly the politically mediated currents of our time."

### tank man tango

The winner of the open award, Deborah Kelly (Sydney, Australia) addressed intervention and every sub-theme of "place/identity/space/community" with her poignant Tank Man Tango: A Tiananmen Memorial (2009) [see pages 2-3]. This two-screen work drew on the ubiquitous original footage of the unknown man with the plastic shopping bags stopping the tanks in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, when the Chinese army crushed the student uprising on June 4, 1989. Kelly notes that "he became a global symbol of courage—except in China, where the past has been erased and memory outlawed."

Kelly distilled the man's tank-blocking tactics into a simple choreography, disseminated these instructions in a number of languages via YouTube and urged people to "forget to forget" by performing the piece wherever they were on June 4, 2009. All this is documented on the first screen, while the second screen shows stills and videos of small and large groups of people clutching their plastic bags and silently performing the Tank Man Tango in public spaces everywhere from Warrnambool to Barcelona, and even in front of the Chinese Embassy in Brussels.

The whole work is engaging to watch, its simplicity belying the emotional response it elicits in viewers, even those not old enough to remember feeling equal parts hope and horror as Tiananmen played out in 1989. The demonstration of the choreography, performed by an Asian man under a spotlight as the narrator counts the time, the only music the rustling of the plastic bags raised and lowered, is poetic. The work's clever basis in an unforgettable image cannot undermine Kelly's sincerity in creating a piece featuring tiers of intervention and fulfilling her intent to make us feel, remember and act.

### wonderland

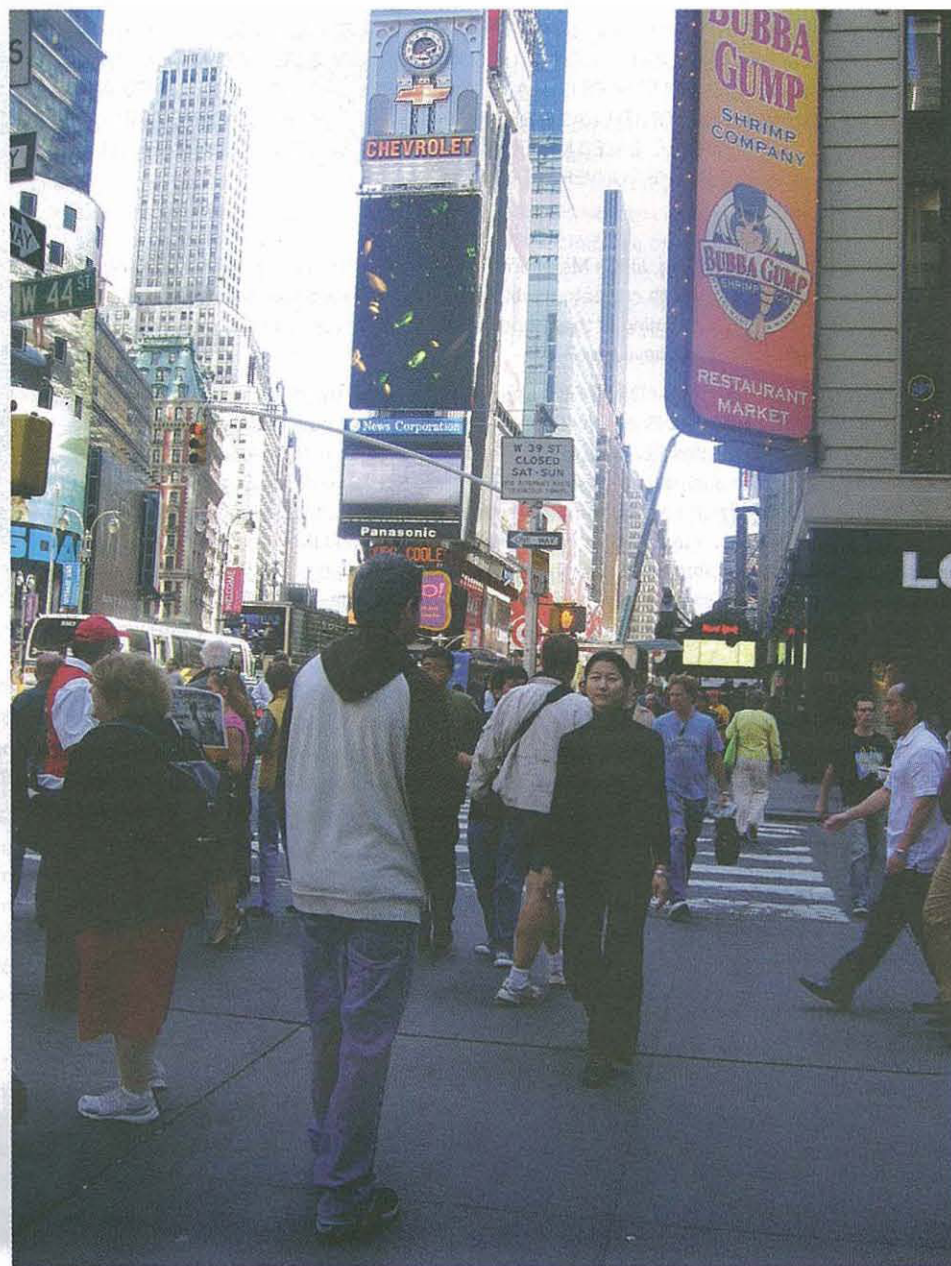
A simple but effective premise also underpins Wonderland (2008), Hye Yeon Nam's evocation of the migrant experience, and winner of the Focal Press Tertiary New Media Arts Prize. The Korean artist, now studying in Atlanta, USA, appears in her video walking tentatively through the streets of that city, while those around her are rushing past, backwards. Of course the video has been reversed—she is walking backwards along the crowded sidewalk, which explains her slightly awkward gait and air of vulnerability—she can't see what lies ahead of her, only behind. "I understand space as the sum of cultural and social forces that act on me. Through the space, my body feels all changes around me instantly and intimately. When I moved from Korea to the United States, my body became a gauge that felt my displacement", explains Hye's catalogue entry. The sense of isolation is made palpable by her movement against the stream and the fact that no-one in the crowds in the video seems to take the slightest notice of her odd behaviour.

### twins

The sound for almost all of the works in the exhibition is supplied through headphones (necessary to fully utilise the gallery, which comfortably housed the 15 works, but isn't huge) with two exceptions. Ambient music emanated from Alison Locke's Twins (2009, Sydney), while the big screen work dominated one end of the darkened gallery, creating a laidback feel with its swirling translucent lava-lamp forms. The mesmerising, warm visuals resembled a slow dance of jelly blobs and rippling silk, and I was surprised to find on reading Locke's catalogue entry that the work is about medical intervention in childbirth, meant to convey anxiety as well as mystery.

### one two three. five

In complete contrast, the other audible track was a series of periodic sharp claps from One Two Three. Five (2009) a video work by Tomoyuki Yago (Japan) which deals with the "negotiation between index time and subjective time." He filmed many people separately, each silently counting to 123.5 seconds after hearing a metronome for three seconds. When they think they have reached 123.5 seconds, the subjects clap their hands and disappear from the screen. When the screen is blank, another group appears and the cycle begins again. This strangely compelling work had me counting along and wondering who would negate their existence first, but an index time is not given—it is not a competition, just a quirky reflection on individual perception of time units.



Sharon Lenger (Israel) is "peering into windows to feel a bit at home..." in her subtitled, sweetly voyeuristic video work To Be There (2008), set to a soundtrack of street noise, footsteps, distant music and snatches of conversation. Clint Enns' (USA) offering, putting yourself out there (2009) is also voyeuristic in the online sphere, showing random chatroom addicts on a pixelated small screen—twitching, scoping eyes and fingers in mouths. The accompanying song wistfully intones, "I wrote the book on how to be lonely." Do they know they're being observed?

Most entries were video works, with only a few interactive pieces, among them Jason Nelson's I made this, you play this, we are enemies (2008, Gold Coast) and Matthew Randall's The Digital Harmonograph (2009, UK) in which sine waves are manipulated to form complex patterns.

With artists from Australia, USA, Germany, Czech Republic, Japan, Israel, UK and India among the finalists of the inaugural Screengrab, eMerge is planning an expanded version next year, fulfilling its mission to bring a world of new media arts to an unlikely corner of regional Australia.

**Screengrab, Intervention Place/Identity/Space/Community, School of Creative Arts New Media Arts Prize, Focal Press Tertiary Prize, eMerge Media Space, SoCA, James Cook University, Townsville, Aug 7-21**

Image: Hye Yeon Nam, from Wonderland (video), Screengrab