

messaging with media

bernadette ashley: screengrab, townsville



SHORT AND RELATIVELY SIMPLE, FLUID NETWORK WON JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY'S SCHOOL OF CREATIVE ARTS SECOND ANNUAL SCREENGAB NEW MEDIA ARTS PRIZE. CLEVERLY AND SUCCINCTLY ADDRESSING THE THEME OF 'NETWORK,' THE VIDEO WORK BY BRAZILIAN ENTRANTS JULIANA GOTILLA AND IZABEL RAINER HARBACH OF RAPADURA STUDIO RELIES ON FAMILIAR VISUAL AND SONIC MARKERS ALLIED IN AN UNEXPECTED WAY.

A world map with the continents formed from water on a slick white surface is the initial visual. Arresting for a number of reasons, it displaces/reverses where we think the land and ocean should be, so it's already messing with our world as we know it; and it immediately raises questions as to how the effect is technically achieved—is it actual water, or a digitally embossed effect?

The map image remains static just long enough to allow us to contemplate these mysteries before the soundtrack kicks in with old school dial-up internet connection sounds, followed by scratchy static. As the sounds continue, drops of water begin to rain randomly onto the world map and the continents lose their distinct outlines. While the visual aspect gradually changes, the audio progresses through all those chirpy little alerts which tell us we have new emails, or someone wants to chat with us online. The fluid continents bleed and grow into supercontinents and then meld in a single world pool to a musical finale of a repeated Skype ringtone.

The sedate, watery video is wonderfully at odds with the anxiety-inducing soundscape, even though some of the net noises mimic plops and splashes. Gotilla and Rainer Harbach are obviously playing on their audience's investment, socially and economically (and therefore emotionally) in internet communication. They are not telling us anything new about contemporary reliance on electronic interaction or how access is perceptually shrinking geographic distance, spanning oceans and redefining borders. Nor are they making any particular judgement about whether this is good or bad. But Fluid Network simply illustrates the intangible in an original, engaging way employing basic and familiar elements. The use of water both for its fluid properties and as a metaphor for universality is inspired.

Another video work from Italy, Multimedia Head by Osvaldo Cibils, shares the tactile, analogue sensibility of Fluid Network, but examines a deficit of the communication network—the compromise of personal identity under the weight of accumulated data. Cibils has taped himself taping things to himself, quite literally. We first see his face unadorned, then watch as he attaches a cassette tape, a mobile phone, a book, a flash drive, a media disc, and so forth, to his head with masking tape. His clumsiness is mildly amusing, the action is laboured, but bewilderment as to his motive keeps the viewer glued for almost five minutes to see the outcome. In the end, Cibils is totally obscured, resembling a mummy who has fallen into a bargain bin at a Dick Smith outlet, the lens of a digital camera staring out in place of an eye. Emphasising the symbolic dehumanisation in process, Cibils doesn't speak a word throughout.

Questions of compromised electronic identity are also played out by Boris Eldagsen in Spam: the Musical; a genre-bending, theatrical and very funny episode subtitled The Lonely Girls. Three young women with a variety of accents, dressed in pyjamas, battle for a hairbrush pretend-microphone via which to relate texts taken from actual spam emails from love-lorn Eastern Europeans and Africans requesting help to claim inheritances, giving out false names, lying about their height—all delivered with disarming sincerity.

The additional Deleted Scene is also a take on image manipulation, but in total contrast to the visual fluffiness of the first part. A woman sits in a spotlight in a cabaret setting wearing a sequined top and smudged mascara, while three sets of anonymous hands move her arms and mouth to mime a bluesy version of the AC/DC song "TNT (I'm Dynamite)." She is a marionette at their mercy and the song mocks her helplessness. It is compulsive to watch, but very disturbing, hinting perhaps at the systemic malignancy behind scamming and identity theft.

The UK's Marco Donnarumma's Golden Shield Music subtly draws our attention to political manipulation, using China's IP censorship (the Golden Shield Project) for a generative net art composition. The work col-

lects the IP numbers of the 12 most-blocked websites and assigns them musical notes, generating a free-form composition. The idea of random and creative art emanating from a project intended to repress individual freedom and limit access to information is the beauty of Golden Shield Music, even if the screen visual, a list of IP numbers, isn't particularly compelling.

Silica-esc by Vladimir Todorovic of Singapore is a generative movie about a new supercomputing platform introducing itself to potential users with extravagant promises of becoming a means to 'unite all mankind'. The graphics are mesmerising—cold, sophisticated and seamless matrices. Despite the apparent gravity at the start of the eight-minute work, the tone quickly becomes tongue-in-cheek as a rich woman and a farmer, each represented by a different roiling geometric form, discuss (in English-subtitled French) who caused a car accident, quickly descending into a class-based slanging match. Silica-esc (in Chinese) also boasts that all individual expression and feeling is recorded in "our spiritual data segment" for classification and dissemination via Spiritupedia. Others will become your friends and "celebrate and rejoice in your networked spirituality in unity." By sending up the persistence of humankind's eternal power struggles and search for meaning, Todorovic seems to be acknowledging that any means by which we choose to communicate and interact will still reflect innate human strengths and weaknesses.

Many of Screengrab's 17 finalists test the limits of technologies as artistic media while hypothesising the potential and pitfalls of the system even as they use it. The role of the artist, regardless of the preferred media, is evidently intact.

Bernadette Ashley was a member of the judging panel for Screengrab. The eMerge Media Space Team was Richard Gillespie, Mitch Goodwin, Elly Murrell, Russell Milledge and Ben Van Houts. The Screengrab judging panel was Jak Henson, Bernadette Ashley and Steven Campbell.

The winning work Fluid Network, and the complete list of finalists can be viewed at: www.jcu.edu.au/soca/JCUPRD1_066890.html

Screengrab, School of Creative Arts New Media Prize, eMerge Media Space, James Cook University, Townsville, Oct 15-Nov 18, 2010

Image: Fluid Network, Rapadura Studio, courtesy the artists