



CRAIG WALSH, HUMANATURE (2003).  
WOMADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST.

# The new face of art

Mark Calderwood looks at media art – the ephemeral, the interactive, the modern and anything but conventional. But can you buy it?

IT'S 8AM, on a dismal morning. Coffee in hand, you're walking into your office. Just for a second, you linger beneath a shimmering waterfall of light that foams and dances around your body.

The new foyer is cocoon-like, bathed in ambient twilight. The couch wriggles and yips as you sit down, and you can't help but smile at its contented trilling as your fingers play over the intricate embroidery that twines its sleek fur.

On a nearby wall, a video painting depicts a lone skateboarder in the rain, poetic as he pirouettes in slow motion. But your eyes are for the unearthly faces projected against the trees in the shadowed atrium, seeming to murmur poignant secrets.

As you pass an ordinary black-and-white photograph, its figures suddenly gasp and scurry out of sight; you can't help ducking back to see if they reappear. You chuckle that you've already witnessed six impossible things this morning ... and wonder what might be next.

Reaching your desk, it dawns that by crossing your foyer, you've interacted with sophisticated technologies without a single click. The simple act of coming to work has moved you to wonder, sadness and delight, in ways you could never expect.

Sounds like the escapist daydream every office worker has, doesn't it? So it might surprise you to learn that this ability to turn your corporate space into a trip down the rabbit hole is well within reach.

Because each of these marvels actually exists, and have already enchanted close to half a million people during exhibitions staged by Experimenta, Australia's powerhouse of media art. Over the past eight years, Experimenta has showcased the cutting edge of new

media – a tactile, technosensual and highly imaginative experience of art – in biennial exhibitions that tour Australia, the Asia Pacific and the UK.

Last year, Experimenta Playground redefined interactivity for more than 44,000 visitors in Melbourne by appealing to the formative instinct of play. In 2005-06, Experimenta Vanishing Point lured 122,208 visitors nationwide to step through the technological looking glass, and Experimenta House of Tomorrow (2003-05) broke attendance records around Australia.

## Media projections can also create strange immersive worlds within real-world architectural and public spaces

Media arts are not new, per se: video, digital and multimedia have been reshaping our industries and our daily lives for a few decades now. What is new are the innovative ways that artists are expanding those media and fusing them with state-of-the-art technologies to communicate their ideas.

Such as Melbourne artist Daniel Crooks. His mesmerising video panoramas *On Motion* and *Perspective Part 2* and *Train No.9* marry conventional film techniques with customised tracking hardware and intricate digital editing, as “a different way of seeing the world outside our normal perspectives”.

Narinda Reeders goes even further to combine video

with motion-sensing software, letting *The Shy Picture* spring impishly to life as its characters flee from sight at a viewer's approach, creeping back when they think themselves unobserved.

Reinventing interactivity along such lines is a hallmark of media art, creating an immediate experience far beyond the pedestrian point-and-click.

What's truly remarkable is that the formidable technology driving these artworks – experimental hardware and software, pattern recognition, digital animation, biometrics and more – is made to disappear. “With the machinery hidden,” says Experimenta's artistic director Liz Hughes, “the experience of the work is that much more powerful. The idea that the technology brings to life is what it's about.”

“Instead of keeping people at a distance like traditional art can, media works engage them physically as well as emotionally. Media art affects the ways people think and feel and act; it subtly transforms, enriches and energises their space,” she observes, noting that it's these qualities that lend media arts to being imagined in the workplace.

Not that it's a leap to replace traditional framed art with sophisticated video paintings in business environments that already take data projection technology and flat panel screens in their stride; nor is it hard to see how they provide a spark which can jumpstart creative thinking.

Media projections can also create strange immersive worlds within real-world architectural and public spaces. In 2003, for example, artist Craig Walsh transformed the headquarters of the Commonwealth, ANZ and Reserve Banks into gigantic fish tanks as his virtual *Urban Tide* swept in, the colossal fish swimming among the floating office furniture creating a startling and whimsical illusion.

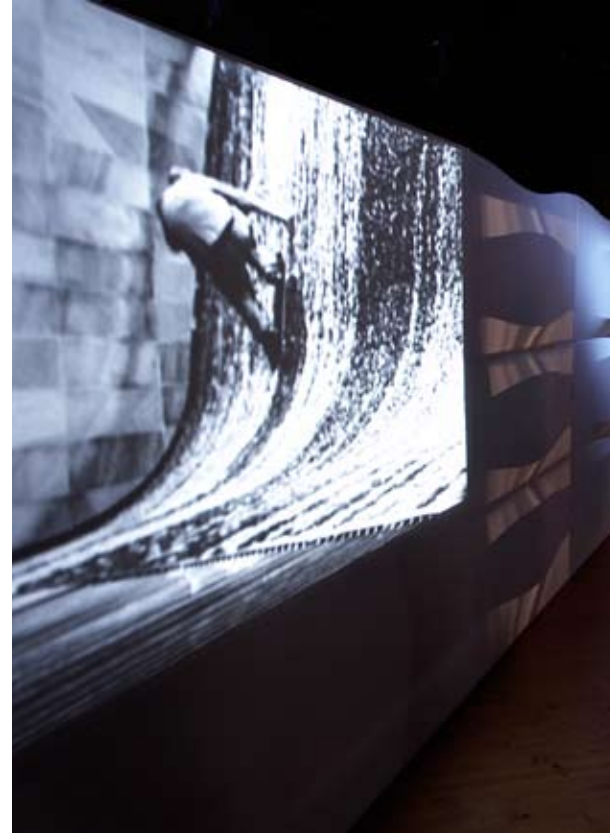
NARINDA REEDERS & DAVID MACLEOD, THE SHY PICTURE (2005), AN EXPERIMENTA NEW VISIONS COMMISSION. COURTESY THE ARTISTS. PHOTOGRAPH BY DARRAN MCCRANN.



## CONTEMPORARY MEDIA ART: TIPS FOR COLLECTING

- Do your investment homework. Determine that the artist is exhibiting consistently, and gaining commissions that will grow their reputation.
- Seek specialist advice. Talk to your gallerist or the artist for input in selecting works, and optimal conditions for display.
- Assess your space. Verify whether the architecture, scale and ambient factors of the intended setting will enhance the work.
- Plan for obsolescence. Establish whether the work can be migrated to new technology as it becomes available, or whether the work is platform-specific.
- Make the commitment. Display the work to its best advantage to ensure maximum exposure, interest and satisfaction.

*Source: The 21st Century Art Collection: collecting and investing in contemporary media arts. Experimenta and Australia Business Art Foundation forum. 24 August 2007. [www.experimenta.org](http://www.experimenta.org)*



Interactive works have an even more enlivening effect on corporate spaces. Unexpectedly appearing in Sofitel Melbourne's public foyer during September 2007, Stephen Barrass' wriggling, touch-responsive ZIZi the Affectionate [sic] Couch (part chaise longue, part pampered purple pet) and the bashful inhabitants of The Shy Picture generated intense public interest as well as delighting and intriguing guests and staff alike.

It's no secret that the advantages to buying art go beyond simple monetary returns. Media art in particular positions the investor as an innovator; it speaks unmistakably of a company that is energetically engaged, socially aware, willing to take risks in embracing new technology and new ideas, and all that good stuff.

It also connects with the growing international presence of media art. Leading Australian artists are prominent at events like ISEAO8 in Singapore and ZeroOne in San Jose among others, with media artists Susan Norrie and Daniel von Sturmer selected as national representatives to the prestigious Venice Biennale in 2007.

And do we even need to go into the publicity potential and boldly original, open-era prestige branding realised by Sofitel Melbourne's micro-exhibition? That's press you just can't buy.

Researcher and artist Barrass is quick to point out the human rewards, not least of which is giving companies a competitive edge in attracting and retaining well-educated and sophisticated staff and clientele. He predicts that in building profile and brand loyalty, "corporate spaces will increasingly become public places of entertainment and leisure as well as business innovation".

The past five years have seen investors adopting a forward-thinking approach, pursuing both the up-to-the-minute cultural cachet and the innovative branding potential offered by contemporary art. Corporate collections especially are being overhauled to highlight attention-grabbing and incisive works which, more and more, means media-based art.

"New media is simply where contemporary art is," insists Ruth Bain, director of Anna Schwartz Gallery Melbourne, "so it's inevitable that, as a collector, you're going to be interested in it, or left far behind.

"The people who are buying art now have grown up with media technologies. They are completely unafraid of it. It's embedded in their environments and in their minds; it's second nature to them.

"But it's not only younger investors – informed collectors of all stripe are interested in artists like Daniel Crooks or Shaun Gladwell not because they're specifically media artists, but because they are considered leading, and very bankable, contemporary artists."

Bankable indeed, with both men recently ranked among Australia's 50 most collectable artists.

As with any investment, it pays to cover the ground. Bain is reassuring that, as the go-to people, art dealers now need to keep abreast of emerging technological developments just as much as artistic trends. "We need to be able to advise clients on technology that is sustainable and appropriate for the purpose, and liaise with agencies like Experimenta who unearth the latest breakthroughs."

As with traditional art, potential buyers need to ask hard questions of the media art they are drawn to – does the work represent quality and innovation? Is it relevant to the collection?

For that matter, how can you make sure it won't be on YouTube next week? Because definitions of art and authenticity can get nebulous around endlessly reproducible digital media, many artists offer a tangible, limited-edition version of their work: typically an archival-standard DVD accompanied by certification of authenticity.

Unlike traditional artists, media artists often take an ongoing interest in how their works are presented and how they perform. Some artists offer forms of after-care as part of purchase arrangements, and many contractually stipulate the display hardware, fair use and site-specificity of the work to ensure their original vision is respected.

Determining whether an artist has staying power – if they are represented by reputable dealers, if they are exhibiting regularly, if their interests and directions will continue to break new ground – is often the key to substantial returns. In 2003, Sherman Galleries sold a copy of Gladwell's iconic Storm Sequence for \$3000; two years later, it sold privately for \$65,000 and was again on-sold by Sotheby's in 2007 for \$84,000 – the first video artwork auctioned in Australia.

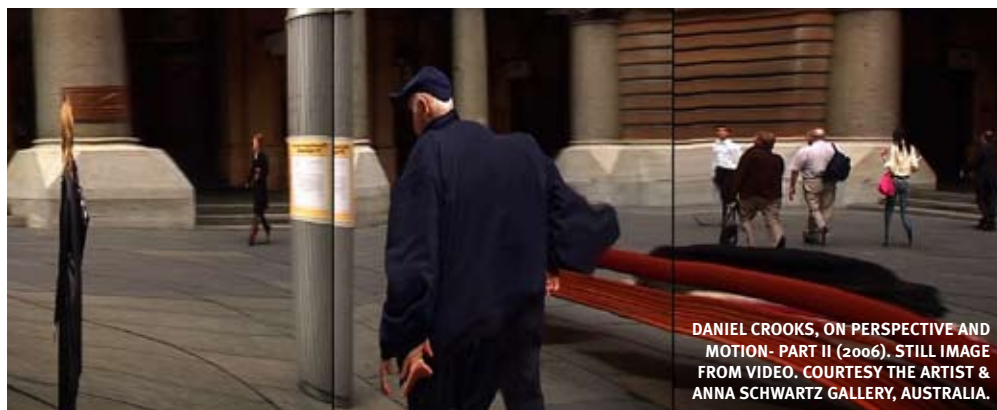
Obsolescence is an ever-present issue when dealing with technology, and the implications for media art warrant careful consideration. Re-releases and upgrades can render common platforms resistant (to some degree) to the process: "New digital technology tends to ingest the old," says Crooks. "Some works can be migrated onto new



SHAUN GLADWELL, GUIDE TO RECENT ARCHITECTURE: FOUNTAINS (2007) INSTALLATION VIEW OF EXPERIMENTA PLAYGROUND, MELBOURNE 2007. PHOTO BY ANDREW LLOYD. SHAUN GLADWELL IS REPRESENTED BY ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY, AUSTRALIA.



CRAIG WALSH, URBAN TIDE (2003), MARTIN PLACE, COMMISSIONED FOR THE SYDNEY FESTIVAL. COURTESY THE ARTIST.



DANIEL CROOKS, ON PERSPECTIVE AND MOTION - PART II (2006). STILL IMAGE FROM VIDEO. COURTESY THE ARTIST & ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY, AUSTRALIA.

platforms as they become available," agrees Bain, "but with others, the technology is integral. It becomes a patina of age, part of their being works of a certain time."

Sponsorship represents an innovative investment alternative, one that carries a different value relationship than work bought off the shelf. "The large scale of public art spectacles appeals to large thinking," says Queensland-based Craig Walsh, known for his transformational, immersive digital projections commissioned for public festivals around Australia and in the Asia Pacific region. "As well as placing them on the cultural map, it gives a business a chance to stamp their brand on the public domain in a way that people remember.

"Because installations are site-specific and continually evolving, there isn't an object to on-sell. Their value is in the unique experience of the work that draws people to that place. It's not like buying shares; there's a kind of faith required, a long-term commitment to the art."

Bain concurs, adding that while corporations may not "have a saleable object at end of the day, there's something spectacular that reflects who you are as a company, and what contribution you make to the world."

As media technology has changed and grown, so have its creative possibilities. And in a re-imagined art of the future, there may be little distinction between seeing and experiencing, between corporate and personal, between art and our environment.

So what's it going to be? When you go to the office tomorrow, will you be stepping into the workplace of the past ... or the future? ★

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### ARS GRATIA PECUNIAE

Art collecting and investing has never been stronger.

According to figures from the European Fine Art Foundation, the value of global art market sales increased by 95% between 2002 and 2006. Sotheby's and Christie's each sold about US\$6 billion of art in 2007, including almost 800 works sold at Christie's for over US\$1 million each.

In 2006, the four largest art markets were the USA (46%), UK (27%), France (6%) and China (5%). In 2007, China moved up to third place. In India, prices have increased tenfold since 2002, and nearly doubled in the last two years.

The Merrill Lynch World Wealth Report indicates that 20% of high net worth individuals globally have allocated their "investment of passion dollars" to art collections.

In Australia, according to the Australian Art Sales Digest, total sales at art auction in 2007

was A\$175.6 million, a 68% growth from the previous years. Australian indigenous art has had a compound annual growth rate of 25.7% in dollar value from 2001 to 2007.

Cameron Hall, founder and director of art dealers Galleries Direct, says that the art investment movement is extending beyond "purchasing an artwork and lettings its value appreciate". He says investors are using their art assets to develop cash flow.

"It's quite simple really. Just like buying an investment property, an investor buys an artwork and can list it for lease through our rentals company GD Rentals. GD Rentals then leases the artwork either to individuals or businesses that are looking to enhance their surroundings.

"It's about time people started acknowledging the huge potential art has as an investment. It's safe to say this space is about to get big."

Source for art market figures: Galleries Direct