

Features

Review: Experimenta Speak to Me

March 13, 2013

Speak to Me, the 5th International Biennial of Media Art launched in Melbourne late last year, assembled the work of Australian & international artists investigating the impact technology has on intimacy and togetherness.

Author [Leanne Amodio](#)



Above: Shih Chieh Huang, Slide to Unlock, 2012 Photo by Mark Ashkanasy, RMIT Gallery, 2012

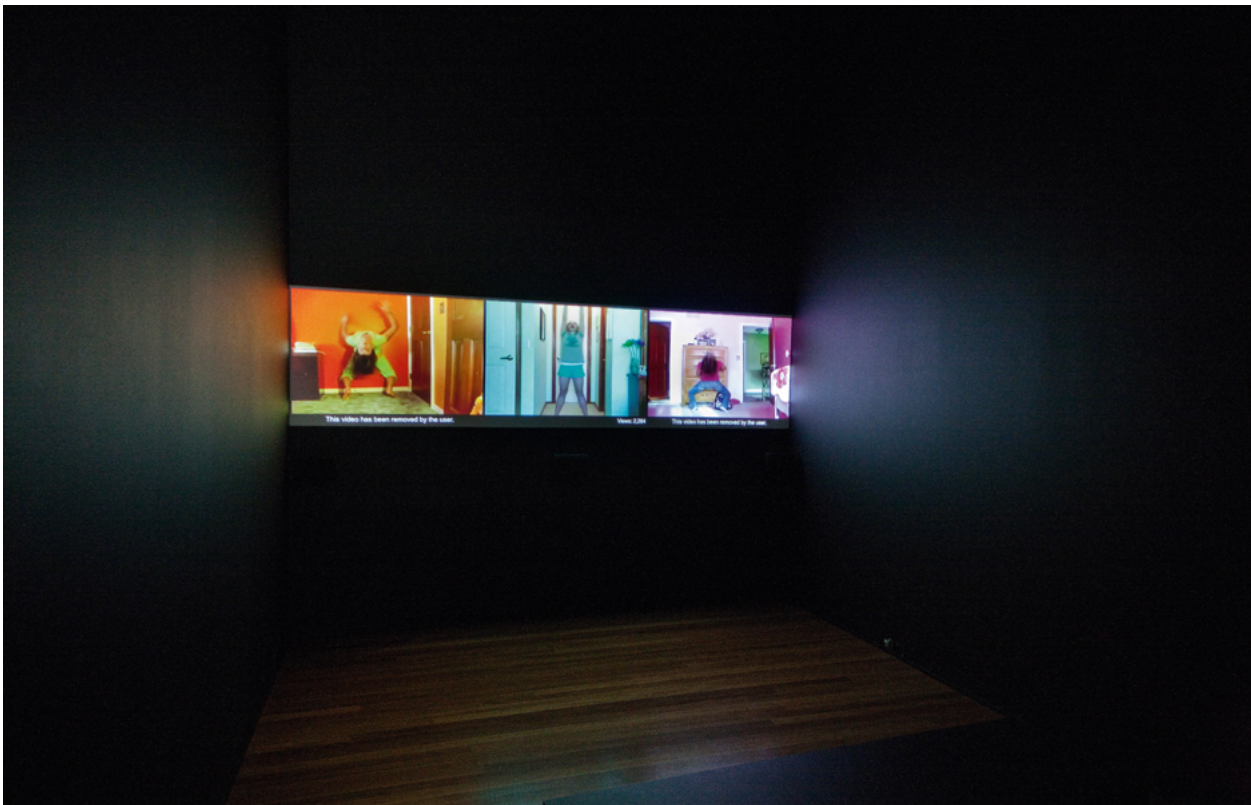
In an age where everything we need to say can be said in 140 characters or fewer, is it any wonder that the new platforms through which we have begun to communicate are being questioned, interrogated and analysed? The rise of social media and our increasing involvement in online communities means that 'overshare' is now a noun, Facebook friends often outnumber the real and everyone has the potential to be heard. The ways in which we connect are no longer constrained by locality – which would suggest, in theory, that we will never be alone again.

Speak to Me, the fifth International Biennial of Media Art, harnesses this perpetual connectedness as a curatorial framework through which local and international artists address issues of communication and intimacy. There is poignancy and melancholy in many of the 32 works on show, making them particularly compelling. Curator Abigail Moncrieff has selected both emerging and established new media artists, with a strong representation from the Asia Pacific region, whose works explore our relationships with the world, with technology and with each other.



Sylvie Blocher, 'Ten Minutes of Freedom 2', HD Video installation (still). Image courtesy the artist

Within the exhibition's main venue at RMIT Gallery, videos dominate the central space. *En masse*, they weaken each other's impact while managing to overwhelm the viewer upon initial impression. As individual showcases, however, they are much more successful; and, given due time and attention, each work gently reveals curious insights into the exhibition's themes. French artist Sylvie Blocher's video work, *Ten Minutes of Freedom 2*, is a 2.5-metre high projection of teenagers from one of the poorest cities in France. Asked to make public the one statement they don't share with others, each appears on camera with their secret printed on their t-shirt. The teenagers' silent, straight-to-camera stares make for a confronting and thoroughly engrossing viewing experience.



Natalie Bookchin, 'Mass Ornament'. Single-Channel HD Video installation (still).
Photo by Mark Ashkanasy, RMIT Gallery, 2012

More silent faces fill Christopher Fulham's *Milieu* video, as strangers move through a public, inner-city setting. Expressions are neutral and the pace at which the work is shown makes this mundane, everyday activity seem somehow hypnotic. Fulham's work is in contrast to the vigour of Natalie Bookchin's video installation, in which hundreds of YouTube clips of people dancing in the privacy of their own rooms are edited together and synchronised to soundtracks from two 1930s films. *Mass Ornament's* initial intrigue is uneasy because of the work's overt voyeuristic qualities, but what prevails is the joyous experience of watching Bookchin's colourful chorus line. It is one of the most appealing works in the exhibition, and its reworking of the individual YouTube clip succeeds in further muddying the distinction between public and private space.

Many of the works on show at RMIT Gallery attempt to forge a connection with the viewer through interaction, and this is done with varying degrees of success. Katie Turnbull's *Modern Vanitas* adapts the mechanisms of the traditional phenakistoscope and her resulting animations are charming, while Shih Chieh Huang's suspended organic forms in *Slide to Unlock* are wondrous, odd DIY-looking creations that come to life once they sense movement in the space. This DIY aesthetic can also be found in the kinetic sculptures of Ian Burns, on show at ACMI. Made from everyday objects, these quirky, medium-scale installations somehow generate video and capture the viewer's attention and curiosity.



Katie Turnbull, 'Modern Vanitas'. Photo by Mark Ashkanasy, RMIT Gallery, 2012

The appeal of Seoul-based Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries' animation comes from their very literal use of words that flash across screens installed at Federation Square and RMIT Project Space. Using minimal graphics, their text-based movie comprises dialogue often typified by humour. It is bold, brash and hard to ignore, especially since the text usually moves a pace that is too fast to read, making the viewer chase the next word for fear of missing something. *Young-Hae and Marc Are In Town For A Few Days Doing Something Or Other, If You're Interested* is nothing we haven't seen before, but this doesn't diminish its charm.



Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, 'Young-Hae and Marc Are In Town...'
Photo by Mark Ashkanasy, RMIT Gallery, 2012

Speak to Me is not just a contained survey of what it means in this day and age to connect; it is an invitation to do so. What the viewer makes of this generous offering is up to them, and whether the invitation is interpreted as a plea or a challenge is purely subjective. Media art can often alienate an audience, which makes the curatorial theme of connection and intimacy a risky choice. Nevertheless, the highlights of *Speak to Me* are revealed in subtle ways – proving that real and effective communication has many different forms.

Experimenta launched Speak to Me, the 5th International Biennial of Media Art at RMIT Gallery in Melbourne in September 2012. The exhibition will begin its two-year National Tour in June 2013 in Sydney as part of ISEA2013.

experimenta.org (<http://experimenta.org>)