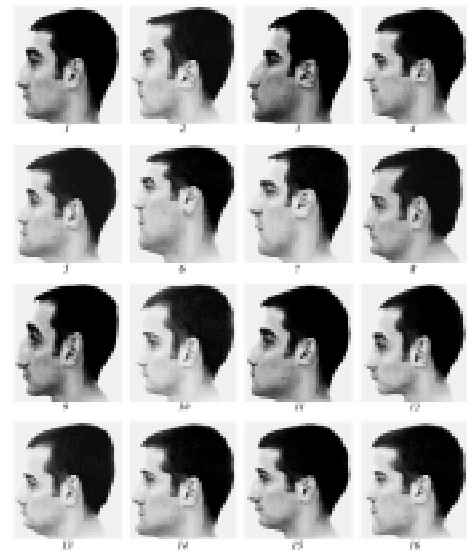


JULIANNE PIERCE

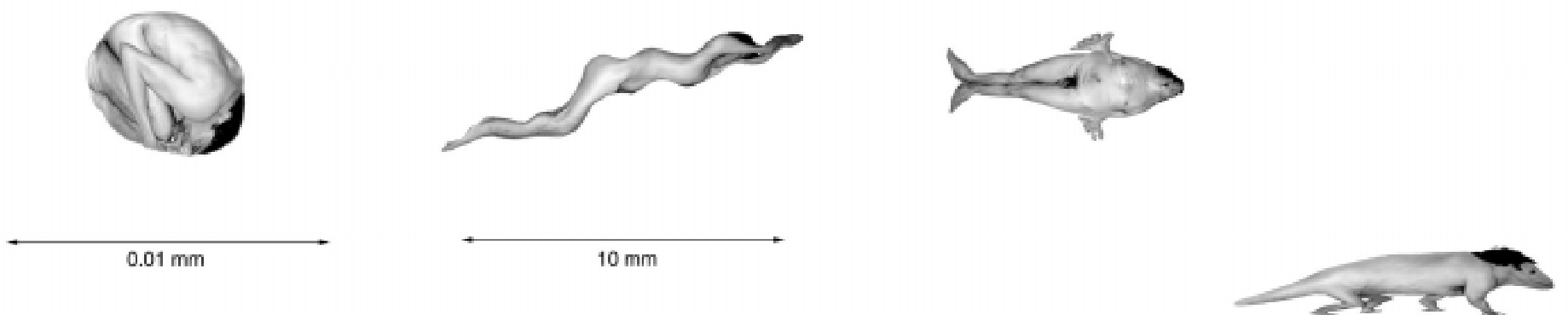
Former Adelaide-based artist John Tonkin is back in his hometown for an Arts SA funded Returning Artist Residency at Ngapartji Multimedia Centre. It's a Wednesday night, and a two hour artist talk has been organised to present his work to the 'public'. Half an hour after the starting time, there are nine perhaps ten people in the room, and we are chatting amongst ourselves and with the artist about the appropriate time to start. Will the hoards rush in, or will it remain an intimate gathering? The small attendance does not faze Tonkin; as he commences his talk an immediate ease and engagement is felt amongst those in the room. This same ease was present at a previous talk during the *Elastic* series of forums, where Tonkin displayed an ability to engage with an audience, almost as if we are in his lounge room or studio, informally discussing his work and practice.

The Ngapartji talk was a rare opportunity to see the development of Tonkin's work over a fifteen year period. The way in which he speaks of his work, in an animated and humorous fashion, relating jokes and anecdotes, is an insight in itself into his processes and influences. We get the sense of an inquiring mind, open to many influences and possibilities – a mind also highly conscious of playfulness and interrogation, which has led to the creation of work which in its seeming simplicity is the result of many hours of research and experimentation.

Top: John Tonkin, *Elective Physiognomies*, 1995
Middle: John Tonkin, *Personal Eugenics*, 2000
Below: John Tonkin, *Strange Weather: a grand unified theory* [detail] 2002
Photos courtesy the artist

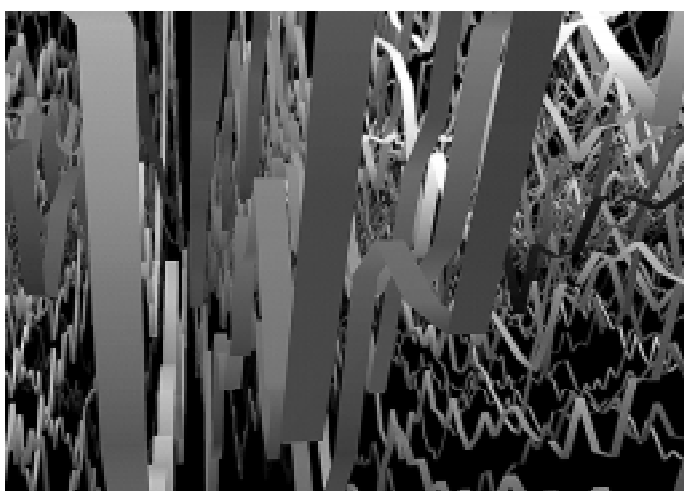


John Tonkin: www.johnt.org



The apparent simplicity is in fact an engagement with minimalism, which has remained as an influence throughout his work from the early days to the present. In the mid-to-late 1980s, Tonkin started to create computer animations. With a background in science, and forays into making experimental and animated short films, he was interested in the computer as a tool and how to use it as a vehicle for generating computerised animation. He cites Brian Eno as one of his main influences at this time, particularly the gentle and mesmerising electronica of works like *Music for Airports*.

The influence of Eno's music is present in the sound-scapes [developed by Tony Kastanos] of these early animations. But in addition to the sound tracks, the presence of a visual and conceptual minimalism is strongly evident in the first major body of work *air, water parts 1, 2 & 3* [1989–1993]. These three animations are what Tonkin calls visual music, “a series of lyrical and poetic animated studies of the elements air and water.” They are created with code developed by the artist and reflect a minimalist approach of paring back to a delicate and sublime aesthetic. The poetry is created by the fluid moving of landscapes, gently undulating like water, constructed of falling papers or slowly moving tendrils. The elegance of these animations is in part a reaction to the over-complicated graphics of many computer animations and as Tonkin says “these works are visually sparse and deliberately simple.”



Belying the visual simplicity however is a complex set of rules and coding structures, which Tonkin has developed in order to give the impression of a smooth and fluid motion, imitating life. Interested in physical forces such as gravity, aerodynamics and elasticity, Tonkin creates a set of properties and applies these to his animated objects. His 1994 animation *These are the days* is perhaps the most engaging example of this – a constant flow of white pieces of paper cascade from the top of the screen, to form neat piles. As explained during the Ngapartji artist talk, the apparently seamless fall of paper was developed through quite a painstaking process of investigating the properties of ‘lilting’ and then translating these properties into code. This was also the first work where Tonkin created the audio track, a composite of several voices of different ages, counting conflicting sets of numbers. The work creates a sense of passing time and as Tonkin has said, “suggests the meditative space of a waterfall, yet also speaks of consumption and waste.”

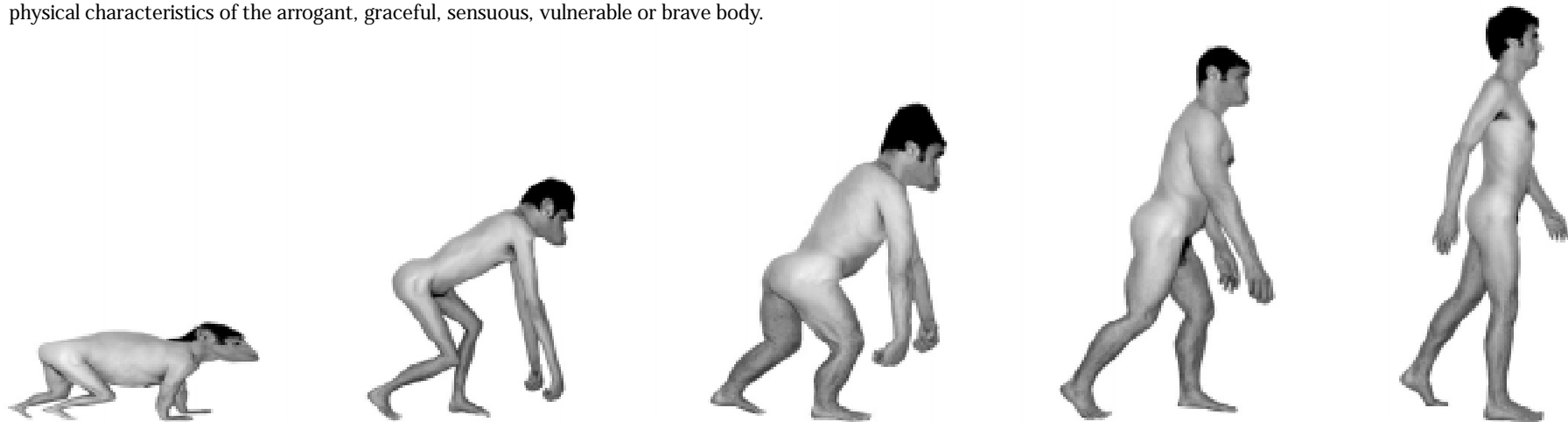
Tonkin is not interested in developing flashy displays of his programming skills, rather he is attempting to offer a software stripped bare, to uncover the potential of the computer, a sort of ‘entity unto itself’. This relationship to the computer and software, in particular, has been a driving force behind his ongoing development as an artist. Whereas earlier works were based on software developed specifically to create animation, Tonkin's interest from the mid 1990s was to develop programs where the software was the end product. In part this shift was influenced by a Visualisation Consultancy undertaken from 1989 to 1993 for the South Australian Department of Fisheries. During this consultancy, Tonkin developed a graphic simulation of an abalone fishery called *Abasim*. The program is a graph that incorporates statistics such as breeding cycles, temperature and fishing patterns. It is designed as a tool to predict the future of abalone colonies using statistical analysis and predictions. This consultancy consolidated Tonkin's interest in systems, patterns and models, and in particular developed his fascination with the visual presentation of data.

The *Meniscus project*, commenced in 1995, was the beginning of Tonkin's engagement with the internet and a move towards an ‘interactive’ installation practice. This phase of work coincided with his move to Sydney, which heralded an exploration of his own identity as a gay man. Issues of self/body image were entwined with a broader engagement with social and science issues, such as claims by genetic scientists that certain characteristics – ‘gayness’ for example – are genetically determined. Knowledge

systems of western science are integral to the *Meniscus project* and, in particular, ideas of eugenics, physiognomy and biotechnology. This phase of work also displays a shift in Tonkin's thinking about science, from an interest in empirical laws to a concern with the ethics and cultural implications of scientific thought.

Meniscus... is a series of three works that explore ideas relating to subjectivity, scientific belief systems and the body. It consists of *Elective Physiognomies*, *Elastic Masculinities* and *Personal Eugenics*. All three works are very much centred around the process of 'data harvesting', the gathering of information which in this case reflects attitudes towards body image and identity. Created as interactives, the sense of playfulness is integral to these works. Conscious of an audience's attention span within the gallery or online space, Tonkin deliberately created two to three minute 'entertaining' interactions. The playfulness operates on several levels: as an ironic critique of eugenics and theories of identity; as an interactive game to collect data from the user and as a sly comment upon the field of multimedia and interactivity. As with his animations, Tonkin is working in reaction to a dominant aesthetic and structure of new media practice and in particular the data-heavy CDROM so prevalent during the 1990s.

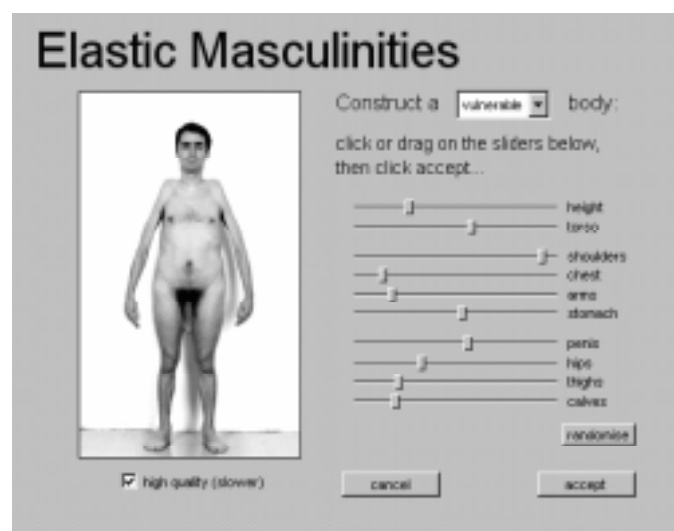
The minimalist approach is still very evident in the *Meniscus...* series, both in the aesthetic of the interface and the underlying rationale to present the software as an artwork in itself. At the core of Tonkin's practice is a concern to talk about contemporary ideas and thought and to present these in a way that is accessible and open to forms of manipulation. Tonkin offers the viewer a sort of template, a simple formula something like the Rorschach inkblot test, aiming to extract the viewer's own attitudes towards identity and image. In the case of *Elastic Masculinities* [1997–98], it is Tonkin's own naked body which is the template, as it is tweaked, stretched and shrunk by the user to suggest the physical characteristics of the arrogant, graceful, sensuous, vulnerable or brave body.



The manipulated template is further developed in *Personal Eugenics* [1999] an installation and web-based work which [quoting Tonkin], "allows the user to capture/upload an image of their face together with a description of the type of person they would like to become. The user [and other users] can then evolve the face to fit the description. Over time different traits can be exaggerated or diminished according to the user's breeding choices". This work has proved enormously popular, and when exhibited at the Queensland Art Gallery over 10,000 printouts of 'evolved' faces were stuck to the wall. Revealing personal fantasies in public, and uploaded to a public database, Tonkin gathers such desires as "Chuck wants to become bold, courageous and sexy" and "Tessie wants to become worldly, wicked and wanton". In as much as these works are about play and personal experimentation, they are also for Tonkin a part of his continuing process of gathering and representing data. He is using the gallery audience as a sort of interactive guinea pig, to build up statistics and analysis across a broad geographic and demographic scope. The input of his audience into all three works of the *Meniscus project* is a process of gathering the averages of cultural ideals, norms and behaviours.

These interests have flowed into the current work *Strange Weather: a grand unified theory [a visualisation tool for making sense of life]*. Having commenced the work as part of a New Media Fellowship awarded in 1999, *Strange Weather* is an ongoing longer-term project that involves an obsessive gathering of non-related data. For two years, Tonkin has recorded such things as fluctuations in the Microsoft share price and the consistency of his own faeces. These statistics are fed into a database, developed by Tonkin using Java programming, and visually represented as coloured bars floating in virtual ether. The aim of the project is to look at possible intersections between the data, and how in fact the artist's bodily waste may affect the share price of Microsoft. Once online, the database will be open to other participants who will be asked to record recurrent everyday activities and feed this in to the database to determine the influence of these micro-events on the macro-universe.

It is a big project, played out with all the irony and playfulness which is a trademark of the work of John Tonkin. His artist talk at Ngapartji was just a small window into the complexities behind this prolific practice; but for the small audience there it was a pleasurable journey with an artist whose insightful visions offer a tangible snapshot of our place in the world.



JOHN TONKIN RETURNED TO ADLEAIDE IN APRIL-MAY THIS YEAR TO PURSUE A SIX WEEK RESIDENCY AT NGAPARTJI MULTIMEDIA CENTRE, COURTESY OF AN ARTS SA RETURNING ARTISTS AND RESIDENCIES PROGRAM GRANT.

Top: John Tonkin, *Elastic Masculinities*, 1998
Below: John Tonkin, *These are the days*, 1994
Photos courtesy the artist

