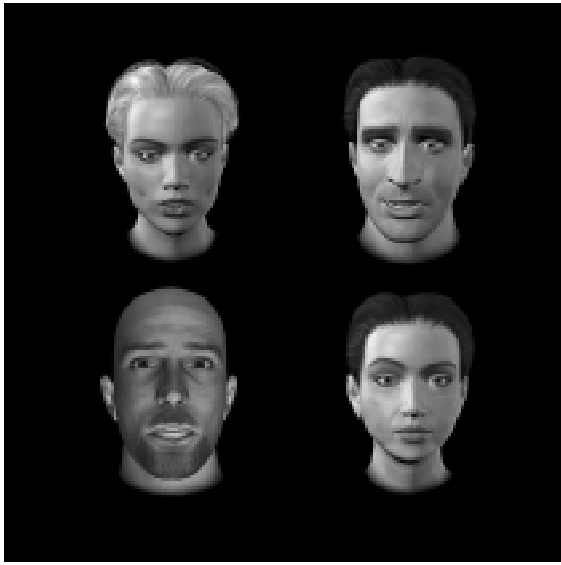


Below: Linda Erceg, *Skin Club* [video still], 2002 Photo courtesy the artist



The skin we're in

Solid Estate
Krasevac, Valdman and Gray
Skin Club
Linda Erceg

Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne
10 May – 8 June

Solid Estate provided a multi-sensory experience that took the viewer beyond the gallery walls. The artists, Krasevac, Valdman and Gray, used three dimensional imagery and sound to reconstruct a disused parking lot in the Collingwood Housing Estate. A number of stereoscopic viewers and headphones mounted on tripods were arranged at various heights and angles, forming a roughly circular pattern within the gallery.

The audience moved from station to station and was only able to see one image at a time, piecing each photograph together in their minds to create a virtual world. A red fire extinguisher sitting on the gallery floor also appeared in the photographs, temporarily confusing reality by suggesting that the viewer was in two places simultaneously.

Central to the exhibition was a strange, sculptural contraption made from wood, string, wire, and an electric turntable found onsite. The sculpture had been photographed at different angles, and the sound generated from it was recorded. Although no figures were present in the photographs, distant voices and traffic were clearly heard in the soundtrack and the reference to human existence was eerie in the derelict environment pictured.

While *Solid Estate* was about the audience's relationship with a deserted, forgotten space, the exhibition in the adjacent gallery, Linda Erceg's *Skin Club*, was an interactive video installation that stimulated intense personal responses from the viewer.

As one entered the room, a chair faced a large screen that projected an image of a naked man. He sat silently, waiting for you to be seated also. When you sat, he began to speak. He was digitally-constructed, with a muscular, square-jawed, big-cocked, cyber physique. His presence was palpable and it was surprising that his voice was warm.

This man was one of four characters who each recalled an incident that had brought them into close contact with a stranger's skin. The stories were intimate in content and by listening one became implicated in the sexual encounter that each character related. The stories were raw, unexaggerated occurrences that were strange and uncomfortable in this public environment.

Sensors in the chair monitored the viewer's response. Having already heard the man's tale, I attempted to get up, but the character was insulted and responded angrily. Unwillingly, I was dragged into his game. Suddenly his face was filling the screen and his raised voice asked me if I was bored? I was no longer a voyeur, but a performer. Other audience members standing around the chair were watching my hesitant, embarrassed responses. Although I knew the projected man was not really human, that he was programmed and did not feel, I sat down again.

But at some point I had to seize control of the scenario and leave the peculiar, therapy-derived world I had entered. Having tried to placate the man by listening to his experience a number of times, I rose and walked away nervously. "Go on, piss off then" a fierce voice hissed behind me. Head down, I walked faster.

Amanda McDonald Crowley, one of 2002 Adelaide Festival's Associate Directors replies to *Broadsheet* concerning our three reviews of the 2002 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art in issue Vol 31 No 2

I feel compelled to write that I thought it was fabulous that three [short] articles should be dedicated to the 2002 Adelaide Biennial in the last issue of *Broadsheet*. It was, however, a shame that only one of those articles even referred to any of the artists or artworks in the exhibition, that a publication which purports to support artists' practice should be so dismissive of the artists in this show. I should make it clear that the comments here are my own, and do not represent the working group, with which I was associated, or the organisations responsible for the exhibition.

For the 2002 Adelaide Biennial – an initiative of the Art Gallery of South Australia [AGSA] held to coincide with the Adelaide Festival of Arts – the Festival and the Gallery took up the challenge of contextualising the exhibition within the programs of both the AGSA and the Adelaide Festival 2002. The AGSA's exhibition *Encounter 2002: the Art of the Flinders and Baudin Voyages* was the point of inspiration for the 2002 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art. *where Art and Science Meet*. Some people may criticise the AGSA for programming an exhibition to fit the political and cultural agenda of the *Encounter 2002* project, others in the arts community were critical of the Adelaide Festival 2002 program which promoted art as having the capacity to effect political and social change.

For one of the reviewers, Chris Chapman, a curator of a previous Adelaide Biennial to critique the exhibition purely on the basis of whether the wall texts were adequate seemed rather vacuous. I certainly don't recall a single wall text for the 1996 Adelaide Biennial that he curated whilst he was Curator of Australian Art at the AGSA. Apparently, contemporary art does not require wall texts, but contemporary art that engages with contemporary ideas and technologies does. Science museums are often criticised for using extensive wall texts which predetermine audience responses and are rather too didactic in approach. In the context of an art exhibition the art should, at least in part, be allowed to speak for itself. If his article had suggested that additional wall texts were required in order to understand how to interact with the work, I might have understood his arguments better, but to base the entire article on the presence or otherwise of wall texts seemed a little counter-productive.

As for John Barbour's churlish refusal to engage with either the concept of the exhibition or a single artwork presented in it, I found it nothing short of infuriating. His opening sentence "This was supposed to be a review of *conVerge 2002 Adelaide Biennial*, but – terrible admission – I can't be bothered", was presumably intended to offend the organisations and curators involved in putting this project together, but in my view also served as an unwarranted slight on all of the artists in the show. I am sure that only a handful of Adelaide based readers would have even understood his pathetically parochial jokes. Perhaps Mr. Barbour should stick to art making, which he does with great thought and indeed rigour, instead of writing about it which he did, in this instance, with nothing short of gratuitous self-indulgence.

The only works he mentions in passing and without naming the artists are the paintings by the Mangkaja artists, which he describes as "Western Desert Paintings of questionable quality". Clearly he neither read the wall texts for these works nor looked at the paintings. The canvases were painted by many artists of considerable repute who hold a great deal of knowledge about their country – they were collaborative works created by a community of artists, many of whom, such as Jimmy Pike and Tommy May, have reputations as individual artists. These particular works were collaboratively painted for the purpose of documenting [and proving in court] their knowledge of their country. If he had bothered to look at the works, one of which depicts Great Sandy Desert country to the south of Fitzroy Crossing in the north of Western Australia, and the other river country of its Bunuba and Goonlyadi painters and the desert country of its Walmajarra and Wangkajunga painters, he might have noticed that it is hardly the subject matter to be found in the Western Desert [or indeed the style of the Western Desert painters]. As the Adelaide Biennial is an exhibition of Australian artists' work, the working group responsible for its curation were committed to including Australian indigenous perspectives of science and technology in the show. As Linda Cooper and I wrote in the catalogue introduction, "indigenous knowledge demands its recognition as priceless intellectual capital, as the systematic organisation and cultural transmission of crucially significant ways of knowing the natural, social and spiritual world. These integrated understandings of local systems can provide insights absent in the partial yet globalising impulses of science".

Festivals are, and should be, sites for the presentation of new works and the critique of new ideas. Whilst numerous organisations in Adelaide present contemporary work in contemporary contexts, a Festival must go beyond this and be allowed to present difficult work and difficult ideas. The AGSA is equally committed, with limited resources, to present contemporary practice within an historic and museological context for art. The 2002 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art was intended as such an endeavour. The artists whose works were presented are nationally and internationally acclaimed. Whilst perhaps underresourced for such an adventurous endeavour, this exhibition did grapple with contemporary issues which a number of Australian artists are currently exploring. I would not presume to suggest that the exhibition was without flaw, but I would love to see more reviews of the exhibition that dealt with its successes and failures. At least Andrew Best made an effort in this direction by actually engaging with some of the works in the exhibition. Although he, like a number of other reviewers, criticised the 'high tech' nature of much of the work, where there was very little high end technology employed at all. There was tissue engineering in the Tissue Culture and Art project and a couple of works that used high end computing, but there was also projection, paint, prints and even water and sun. There were indeed technical hitches and inconsistencies which the Gallery and the Festival, and indeed the curators and the artists should take responsibility for and learn from. But this is one of the pitfalls of taking risks.

In Terry Cutler's last engagement as Chair of the Australia Council, for the opening of the artist Richard Dunn's work he said, "Recently I read a review of the 2002 Adelaide Biennial. That exhibition, *conVerge*, where art and science meet, was being dammed by the reviewer as neither art nor science. Inter alia, my short essay in the catalogue was singled out for comment – I was informed in patronising tones that my reference to C. P. Snow's comments about two cultures was inaccurate and misinformed. Snow had not been talking about a divide between the arts and science but, more narrowly, about the high table divide between noisy intellectuals, such as writers, and sober scientists. Somehow I read this review as implying that visual artists do not have ideas! I hope that reviewer is here tonight, for two reasons. First, because I would love an argument, regardless of what C. P. Snow may have said or meant, about whether or not we are today in danger of implementing a policy of two cultures – an education system and pattern of community investment that devalues the creative arts and a liberal education; that devalues that education we used to associate with the maintenance of a civil society and a richness in our quality of life as citizens. Secondly, because tonight's exhibition confounds anyone who says that canvasses are not about ideas, and the visual representation of complex thinking. I believe we do not think enough about the arts and the nature of the gift transaction; this is a transaction, a connection, beyond economics. The ritual of giving involves offering and then the complex act of receiving the gift, and the obligations that go with it. As a community, mostly we fail to acknowledge our debt to these precious givers, our artists, they who are the cultural capital of our community".

Cutler has also commented elsewhere that "just watching people, an amazing cross section of people, engage with *conVerge* reminded me of the danger of underestimating our audiences, and overestimating the value judgements of critics". Whether one liked the exhibition or not, *Broadsheet* might have commissioned writers who were at least prepared to acknowledge the artists and their work and undertake a critical reflection of the exhibition, not a damning condemnation of its context and host organisations. Not to put too fine a point on it, I would have been embarrassed to have had writing of the calibre of at least two of these reviews published in a national journal.