

SEMAPHORE

Neil Emmerson

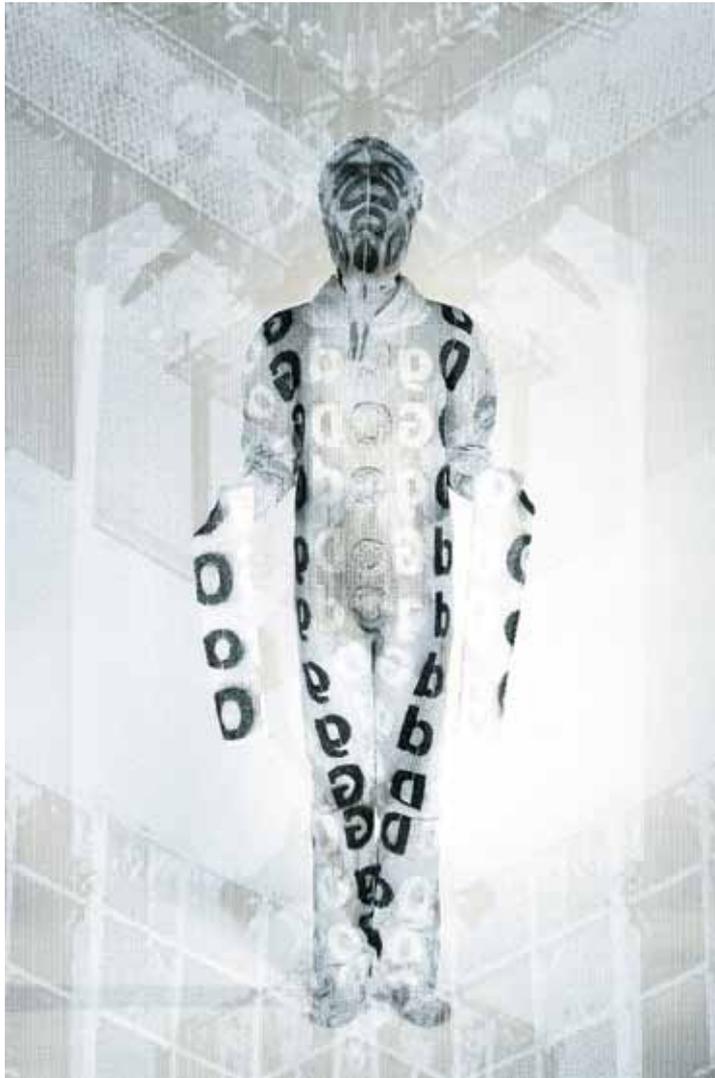


Figure 1. Neil Emmerson, *Spare Room*, 2016, screen and digital print on arches velin and black card, acrylic paint. Photographer: Andrew Barcham.

This exhibition report has two parts. In the first, I provide a brief description of the context of this Melbourne-based project and its various outcomes. The second part is an essay by Bridie Lonie that was published in a catalogue produced for the exhibition. Alongside the texts, photo-documentation of the work will illustrate the shift of exhibition context between the gallery and the street.

"Semaphore," exhibited at Project Space/Spare Room at RMIT University in Melbourne (7 October–17 November 2016), was the result of the 2016 Print Imaging Practice Residency program that I had engaged with earlier in the year.¹ The month-long residency occurred as part of an ongoing engagement with The News Network (TNN), a trans-Tasman research group formed in 2015 by Marian Crawford and involving a group of artists and academics in Melbourne, Canberra, Auckland and Dunedin. This group considers the ways in which the news media, in all of its various manifestations, impact on the range of fine-art print practices represented by this group of artists, who work with print as a major focus of their individual practices.

Initially, the group met in Dunedin in 2015, hosted by the Print Studio Residency Program at the Dunedin School of Art. This residency resulted in an exhibition in the Dunedin School of Art Gallery, "ON AIR," and set the scene for a continuing engagement with the group that resulted in the residency program at RMIT offering print workshop access through TNN participant Richard Harding, who leads the Print Imaging Practice Studio.² RMIT is arguably the bastion of print practice in Melbourne, indeed in Australia, with a long and esteemed history of providing training and education in traditional and, more recently, in expanded print practice.

Through the RMIT School of Art Galleries and the Print Imaging Practice Studio, the Lightscares Project was also offered to the TNN group during 2016. Lightscares is a public lightbox project situated in Rodda Lane, which is located off LaTrobe Street within the RMIT campus district at the northern edge of the Melbourne CBD and is accessible 24/7.³ This resulted in "Broadcast," which illuminated a part of Melbourne's famed laneways during June 2016.

Neil Emmerson is a Senior Lecturer and coordinates the Print Studio at the Dunedin School of Art. Neil has a Master in Visual Arts from the Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney. His research expertise spans a broad range of Print-related technologies, Identity Politics, Queer Theory, and Gay and Lesbian History. His work is held in the collections of major public institutions including the Auckland Art Gallery, Australian National Gallery in Canberra, the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney and the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. In 2006 he was awarded the Fremantle Print Award. He has been an artist in residence with Cork Printmakers in Ireland in 2013, and at RMIT University in Melbourne in 2016.

1 <https://www.rmit.edu.au/events/all-events/exhibitions/2016/october/semaphore>.

2 <https://dunedinprintlab.wordpress.com/projects/the-news-network/>.

3 <http://art.rmit.edu.au/our-work/lightscares/>.



Figure 2 and 3. Neil Emmerson, *Untitled (broadcast/urinal)*, 2016 and *Untitled (broadcast/figure)*, 2016, digital print on clear acrylic, metal light box.



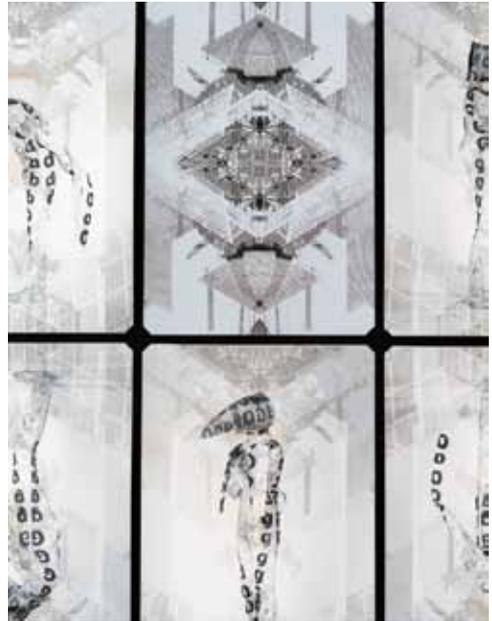
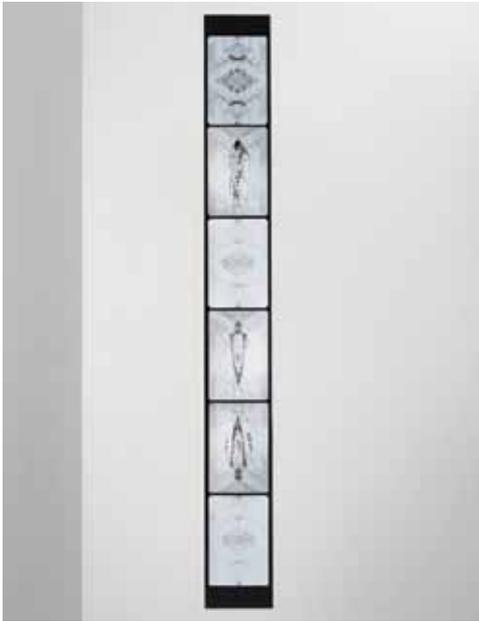
Figure 4. Neil Emmerson, *Urinal*, 2016.



Figure 5. Neil Emmerson, *Figure*, 2016.



Figures 6-8. Neil Emmerson, *Spare Room*, 2016, installation views, screen and digital print on arches velin and black card, acrylic paint. Photographer: Andrew Barcham.



Figures 9-12. Neil Emmerson, *Spare Room*, 2016, installation views, screen and digital print on arches velin and black card, acrylic paint. Photographer: Andrew Barcham.

BRIDIE LONIE,

Semaphore is a signaling system based on a rotational arrangement of gestures, sometimes using flags. It was designed in France in the nineteenth century as a form of communication across distance, often in a military context. We see its continued daily use in the signals of on-ground airport traffic controllers who ensure safety as the plane taxis into its final landing site. Neil Emmerson's use of the term is at once ironic and redemptive. The gay man who has been hurled from a high building in Syria in an anti-homosexual gesture will not land safely. The photographs that were immediately sent around the world are designed to form communities of approval or dissent. Emmerson folds the original image into a dense network of pattern and sign, providing within the spaces art offers an alternative landing.

Throughout his career Emmerson has attended to situations where men find their personal choices inextricably connected with the political. Schooled in a Foucauldian analysis of sexuality, Emmerson investigates the heterotopias that offset the classic signifiers of masculinity. Mao Tse Tung's mythic heroic young soldier Lei Feng (*Gui Nan Feng* 1994) was seen as an object of desire for men and women alike and is commemorated in a bridal dress made of handkerchiefs printed with the hero's portrait. In *Habitat* (2002) he worked with insider signs indicating assignation points near War Memorial Parks. In 2004 he made a series of works indicating the ways that the torturers of the Abu Ghraib atrocities betrayed their own sexuality as they tortured their prisoners at Abu Ghraib. In another series, *inhabit me (like a memory)* (1993), the queered exposure of that usually private anatomical entity, the anus, was laid out in multiples for an audience for whom it is a mark of beauty.

Emmerson is a printmaker. That means that his practice is steeped in the politicized forms of the multiple, the indexical habits of pressure and repetition, the democracies of dissemination and dispersal, the habit of moving onward and outward, the sense that meaning never defaults to a singularity but moves across and within a wider field of signification. As Warhol realized, the work works best when it reaches a point at which it is repeatedly, and potentially infinitely, unique. Whether that urge for repetition is a specific feature of male sexuality or, as Hal Foster suggests a desire for dominance over ever increasing moments of experience, to alleviate or to irritate the moment of traumatic encounter, it is a consistent feature of Emmerson's practice. Even his large works, where the print blanket itself is used, contain doubles or triples.

Repetition is also structurally present in Emmerson's use of the theatrical in gesture and of costume. The point of theatre is that a performance will be repeated. The individual actor steps into a role that provides a vehicle for utterances within a community of actors. In *Habitat* (2002) his actors have been hidden within the night and unseen, except for the as it were abandoned shoe lying beside the hedge. However after the Abu Ghraib works he began to design a series of costumes that were initially exhibited on hangers, as if they were body bags, but in more recent works are worn, inhabited by people whose faces are invisible but whose body language is made more apparent by the abstraction of their faces. These costumes are stamped with the initials G.O.D (Gay On Demand) and engage with the carnivalesque reversals of roles implicit in military organizations.

In his Goya-like reproductions of the forced performances of the Abu Ghraib victims, *I was his...* (2005) Emmerson drew from the already infinitely reproduced images of the victims of the Abu Ghraib atrocities. In *Semaphore* he draws on digital images designed to permeate targeted communities. We see a gay man blindfolded, photographed from below as he is thrown from a tall building. The photographer has focused on the strength of the man's chest, the falling man gesture, the heads of those who threw him, looking down as he falls. The witnesses see what we cannot see, the ground on which he will break, his physical beauty thrown as a challenge to the gay viewers of this image on the net.

Emmerson commemorates this man's death in a field of pattern and form in which the continually falling man - a trope repeated since 9/11 - will be held within a matrix of shape and pattern that stabilize that falling, keeping him in suspension, in a kind of ongoing life that resists the prejudice and hatred that killed him. Just as the photograph was disseminated in unimaginably large numbers, Emmerson counters that dissemination in a kaleidoscopic multiplying of the image within print.

Emmerson's knowledge of print history is always active. Goya is here: Goya's images often included the all-important onlookers' acts of witnessing, compliance and consent. From a very different tradition and time, Emmerson has picked up the way the man's shadow, resembles uncannily Yves Klein's redemptive *Leap into the Void* (1960). The tactic of repetition insists on the connection between all of the parts. The installation is built of the repetition of the image itself, mirrored in a potentially infinite field that forms chevrons and arabesques, bridging the iconoclastic and iconic traditions of artmaking. Emmerson regards his practice as a field of queering that draws on the orientalism within which, when concealment was more necessary, it consistently found a home. One of the strengths of this work is its play between the radically straightforward image of the man falling, blindfolded, and the masked figures of those who seem helpless to stop this, semaphoring within costumes as if drawn from Noh theatre, trapped in a playing out of predetermined roles and carefully structured signs designed for a world of distance and difference.

Bridie Lonie is an Emeritus Member of Otago Polytechnic, a lecturer in Art History and Theory at the Dunedin School of Art and a PhD candidate in the Department of History and Art History at the University of Otago, New Zealand.