

Writing media art into (and out of) history.

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Abstract

This paper will review the context of the development of interactive media art within Australia in the 1990s. It is particularly interested in the conditions that enable arts practices to galvanize into an arts culture. Such conditions include publishing, the role of criticism and debate, funding, advocacy and the curation of focussed and dedicated exhibitions.

The paper will seek to ask some questions answers as to why the conditions of an emerging media arts culture in the 1990s have virtually lost momentum. And why, ultimately, the very notion of media arts has become annexed as a minor moment in the history of the moving image.

Keywords

Advocacy, Australian media arts, media arts history

One of the challenges facing any emerging artistic movement is the need to find an audience and generate a public. The process whereby a new form becomes part of culture involves what Julianne Pierce has described as an “active circuit” of access, information and understanding, an integrated network involving artists, access to and curatorial advocacy of their work, as well as critical discussion and evaluation of it (Pierce, 2001, 14). This paper traces the promising history of this process within Australian media arts during the mid to late 1990s and asks some questions to do with its status in 2009.

In 1997 the Australian Film Commission published *Other Spaces: The marketing, distribution + exhibition of interactive art*, a major report by Rachel Dixon on emerging media arts. Dixon’s working principles in compiling the report hinged on the media specific nature of the work in question, emphasising CD ROM and the World Wide Web as media forms as well as modes of distribution. Dixon’s attention to the pressures on established art galleries in relation to installation issues focused specifically on the interactive imperative, on the need to cater for the presence of computers and the logistics of people actually wanting to interact with them. The general tenor of the report is one of potential, the feeling that interactive art may soon take off.

What is really curious about this report is that even though it was commissioned and written at the height of interactive fervour in Australia (see Tofts, 2005), it was highly cautious in its observations to do with the levels of public familiarity with and access to interactive art, as well as the provision of funds and resources adequate to its support and development. Dixon’s recommendations in *Other Spaces* suggest that by the late 1990s, interactive art was still finding its place in culture. This dual inflection, of curatorial as well as conceptual place, is as important and tenuous today as it was in 1997 (see Tofts, 1996).

Situations of interaction

The development of specific venues for engaging with media arts is relatively new. The opening in Melbourne of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image at Federation Square in 2002 and the Experimedia Gallery at the State Library of Victoria in 2003, marked a significant moment of consolidation in the provision of purpose-built spaces for the exhibition of interactive art. Prior to the introduction of these institutions, these “other spaces”, virtually all media arts exhibitions were held in gallery and museum contexts that were not designed, nor well equipped for such work (such as Mike Leggett’s and Linda Michael’s landmark 1996 *Burning the Interface: International Artists’ CD ROM* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney).

But access to new work alone is not sufficient to create an arts culture. In the late 1990s a series of exhibitions, directed at heightening understanding of the art of the cyber age, was held in different capital cities. In 1996 the Performance Space in Sydney hosted *Cyber Cultures* (conceived by Kathy Cleland and

David Cranswick) and Scienceworks museum in Melbourne staged *Cyberzone*. Both were designed to raise public awareness and understanding of the signature themes of the emerging world, from cyberspace and multimedia, to virtual reality and artificial intelligence. *Cyberzone* was memorable in that it included one of the most famous, internationally recognised computer-mediated works by an Australian artist to date, Jon McCormack's "interactive museum of un-natural history", *Turbulence* (1995).

Conceptually, this sense of place was also gaining momentum with the presentation of conferences and symposia devoted to critical discussion of media art. In 1992 the Third International Symposium on Electronic Art (TISEA) was held in Sydney and was the first substantial event to combine critical discussion with performances and exhibitions of work by leading Australian and international media artists. In 1996 the Melbourne based Contemporary Art and Technology group (CAT) presented *Digital Aesthetics One: new art and high technology* in Sydney (curated by Werner Hammerstingl and Carolyn Deutscher), featuring international speakers Mark Dery and Allucquère Rosanne Stone. In 1997 the Centre for Contemporary Photography in Melbourne presented *(Crack the) Binary Code* (convened by Kevin Murray), which addressed the apparent lack of informed, public discussion about the cultural worth of multimedia-based art forms. In the same year Experimenta Media Arts presented *Altered States: psychotropic visions and the digitally-corrupted gaze*, a major exhibition of Australian media art works organised around the theme of digital transformation (curated by Helen Stuckey and Shiralee Saul). Like *(Crack the) Binary Code*, *Altered States* took place at the same venue of the Interact Asia Pacific Multimedia Festival in Melbourne. The choice of this corporate venue was an inspired one, as it assured a diverse and concentrated audience for the exhibition beyond the usual media arts community. Both were incisive examples of the ways in which media arts curators at the time would leave no context unexplored to further public access to media art work.

In the name of media art: advocacy and support

These were important developments. They signalled that media art was a vibrant and ongoing engagement with the kinds of technologies that were being encountered on a daily basis at home and at work. Curatorial and funding organizations have been vital in translating this circuit of access, information and understanding into public profile, in the expectation that media art could mature from being an emerging to an established cultural form. The Australian Network for Art and Technology (ANAT) in Adelaide, whose mission, since 1988, has been to support established and emerging artists working in video, sound, performance and media arts, has been a seminal force in maintaining attention to the connections between art and technology, as has Melbourne based Experimenta Media Arts since 1986. More established organizations, such as dLux Media Arts in Sydney (formerly the Sydney Intermedia Network, which evolved out of the Sydney Super 8 Group in 1981) or the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide (formed in 1974), actively embraced the challenge and responsibility of supporting the interactive arts as part of their commitment to experimental practices across a range of media.

By way of activating this principle, the Australian Film Commission sponsored a series of timely publications and conferences between 1993 and 1998 to explore the convergence of film and emerging media. In 1995, for instance, Mike Leggett edited *Electronic Media Art: An International Guide for Exhibition and Distribution*. The guide was aimed specifically at artists and offered a comprehensive listing of national and international resources, from media arts events and exhibitions to distributors, internet service providers and online publications catering to critical discussion of computer-based art. Directed principally at the film industry, the AFC's *Filmmaker and Multimedia* conferences (1993-1998) were designed to introduce filmmakers to multimedia technologies and the concepts and techniques of interactivity. Whether or not they contributed anything to what could be called interactive cinema is not really the point. What they achieved was an important dialogue between an established industry and an emerging one on the theme of where screen culture *could go* in the future. This sense of anticipation, specifically in relation to issues such as the distribution of work, was evident in the last of the AFC conferences in 1998, *Being Connected: the studio in the networked age*, which was specifically devoted to the possibilities of the internet as a means of distributing work and a creative space of collaboration.

Critical practice: writing on media arts

The gradual sophistication of modes of distribution and access, both nationally and internationally, was important in making the work of Australian media artists available to prospective audiences. But access is not sufficient to create a critically informed audience for whom such work has a cultural place. Critical writing and dedicated publishing made a decisive contribution to sustained dialogue to do with media arts and, most importantly, to its status as information in the world.

Certain critics in the late 1980s and 1990s were prominent in characterising the emerging practices of media arts and, often, in the absence of public familiarity with the works under discussion, simply describing them. John Conomos, McKenzie Wark and the late Nicholas Zurbrugg are three exemplary figures who set about the task of finding appropriate critical languages and paradigms with which media arts could be situated. For Zurbrugg, media arts practices were the most recent manifestations of an ongoing historical sensibility that continued the “European modernist avant-garde’s explorations of kinetic and electronic art”. In 1994 he edited ‘Electronic Arts in Australia’, a special issue of the media studies journal *Continuum*. This was the first substantial collection of essays devoted to the study of “the new electronic arts” in Australia.

John Conomos, a practising artist and writer, had for some time been arguing for a more subtle and persuasive way of thinking about digital media in the context of convergence. Conomos was already doing the kinds of things that critics and artists alike were anticipating in relation to the advent of multimedia. Conomos’ work, going back more than twenty years, was an intricate synthesis of film, video, performance, photography and media theory. His concept of new media as a cross-disciplinary mode of image-sound writing was influential in the burgeoning culture of media arts criticism in the 1990s (Conomos, 2007, 196).

McKenzie Wark represented a younger generation of writers growing up with computers, the internet and global telecommunications. During this time Wark emerged as Australia’s most articulate and committed theorist of concepts such as cyberspace and virtual reality. From the mid 1980s onwards, Wark took media theory to very strange places, re-defining the world of social relations in the age of telecommunications as a “virtual geography” (Wark, 1994). Wark recognised in the inclusive involvement and open-endedness of media art a corollary of the kinds of relations between people and information in telecommunications networks such as the internet. This, for him, was the basis of a new aesthetics of abstraction that he explored in his writings on the interactive art of the early to mid 1990s (Wark, 1995).

Digital imprimatur: publishing media arts

During the late 1980s and 1990s, a series of important publications provided the cultural adhesive that gathered and cohered the dislocated instances of media art exhibition and symposia, providing a regular and reliable forum for discussion about it.

fineArt forum has the distinction of being the internet’s longest running arts magazine (1987-ongoing). It was aimed at both professionals in the field as well as a broad, general readership. Founding editor Paul Brown and his successors Linda Carroli and Nisar Keshvani also maintained a strong ethos of aesthetic inclusiveness, in which media arts were discussed alongside traditional practices in the fine and performing arts. The advent of *RealTime* in 1994, the national bi-monthly arts magazine, included as part of its inaugural editorial policy to place particular emphasis upon hybrid and techno-arts that received little media attention. Under the stewardship of editors Keith Gallasch and Virginia Baxter, *RealTime* became the most reliable print source of regular reviews and critical discussion of media arts exhibitions, conferences and new work, as well as profiles of and interviews with artists. *Mesh*, initially the journal of the Modern Image Makers Association and, from 1996, Experimenta Media Arts, was one such publication that very early on included an ongoing focus on and commitment to the emerging “computer arts” scene. In 1995, for instance, the artist Peter Morse was interviewed in *Mesh* in relation to *Virtualities*, an exhibition of “recent Australian experimental computer and video art” he had curated for the Melbourne Fringe Festival at Scienceworks. The interviewer, Jun-Ann Lam, discussed notions of interactivity and the meanings of work such as Martine Corompt’s *Cutometer* and Patricia Piccinini’s *Mutant Genome Project* with mum, dad and the kids (Lam, 1995). This interview is historically significant in that it is possibly the first example

of an audience response survey tapping into public perceptions of the interactive imperative. While not specifically focussed on electronic media, *Artlink*, under founding editor Stephanie Britton's leadership, had taken an active interest in developments in art and technology, with special issues in 1987 and 1996 devoted to this theme. In a subsequent special issue on the theme of the "e-evolution of new media" in 2001, Julianne Pierce (then director of ANAT) observed that the "fourteen years since that special issue of *Artlink* have seen a creative and technological surge, creating development, growth, transition and a rapid maturity" (Pierce, 2001, 18).

The publication that was synonymous with high profile, international exposure of Australian media artists throughout the 1990s was *21C* (1990-1998). *21C* was conceived in 1990 by Linda Wallace and Mark Wolff for the media unit of the Australian Commission for the Future, a government sponsored organization committed to raising public debate to do with futures issues. While *21C* was vigilant in its coverage of developments in CD ROM art, digital imaging, hypertext fiction and interactive media generally, it was not, ostensibly, an arts publication. *21C* was oriented more towards discussions of emerging phenomena associated with cyberculture, such as the internet, biotechnology, cyberspace, artificial life and technological acceleration generally. In 1994 *21C* went international with a new publisher, Gordon & Breach International, but still had the advantage of being produced in Australia. In terms of illustration and design, *21C* actively promoted the work of Australian illustrators and artists, many of whom were also the subjects of the very discussions of media art that the magazine included in its pages. The exclusive use of Australian artists could be interpreted as parochialism, a view that its longest serving editor, Ashley Crawford, flatly rejects:

Parochial suggests we didn't look afar, but we did. The reality was the best stuff was coming out of Australia. We travelled and encountered work from all over and we were sent portfolios from London, Paris and New York. The aesthetic we were after was simply here all along (Crawford, 2004).

Testifying to Crawford's endorsement, William Gibson described it as "the best looking... pop-futurological publication in the world" (Gibson, 1997, 5).

Prior to *21C*, it was in the pages of *Tension* during the 1980s that we trace the gradual appearance in culture of the computer as an aesthetic object. Published between 1983 and 1990 by Ashley Crawford, *Tension* was dedicated to music, art, style and ideas. It was a kind of sedimentary record, a prehistory of the convergence of computers and art and was one of the first serial publications in Australia to be designed on an Apple Macintosh computer. Cheek by jowl with essays on '80s cultural icons such as Nick Cave, Barbara Kruger, Peter Greenaway and Malcolm McLaren, we encounter discussions of cyberspace, computer graphics and powerful new technologies such as the Quental Paintbox. In a 1987 discussion of the impact of this technology on video, photography and the fine arts, Crawford observed that the increasing prevalence of computer graphics and synthetic imagery "is a perfect *avant garde* to close the century" (Crawford, 1987, 18).

So what went wrong?

Avant-garde movements have historically been *fin de siècle* phenomena that blend into the next century. Media arts in Australia have not enjoyed such longevity. This is not to say that media artists are no longer practising and exhibiting, or that criticism and discussion of media art has ceased. What is conspicuous is the diminution of focussed public attention directed at its place within culture, even as being marginal or fleeting. The concentrated momentum around its emergence that I have delineated above is to be expected of a new art movement, as is the diminution of novelty, since the very notion of the avant-garde is a temporary state that resolves into familiarity or obscurity. What were the reasons, then, for the relegation of media art to the background (apart from, that is, journalist Sebastian Smee's 2005 judgement that "few people, apart from a few dedicated insiders, are going to care about much of it in a few years" [Smee, 2005, 19])?

Smee's dismissive judgment was announced in a review of my book *Interzone: Media Arts in Australia* (2005). At the time I felt it was a priggish and short-sighted assessment of an art form that was not recognized nor respected by the "fine art" critical establishment. Now I'm not so sure. In a RealTime interview with Lizzie Muller published around the same time, I proffered the notion that "*Interzone* was designed to be a kind of policy speech to the Australian body politic to embrace media art as part of its national culture and not have it fade ignominiously into a minor footnote in the history of art in this country" (Muller, 2006, 23). Writing from the vantage point of 2009, I fear that this call was not heeded and media art is fast becoming a minor footnote. As the focus of this paper has been on the productive writing of media art into history, I offer a series of deliberately foreshortened provocations on the factors responsible for writing it out of history.

Five theses on the demise of media arts in Australia

The following five theses (in no particular order) offer suggestions in response to this question and are deliberately foreshortened in order to provoke further debate; a debate that, so far, has not happened. It is hoped that these questions will, once again, put the question of Australian media arts back on the cultural map.

1. Interactive fatigue

The attraction of the point and click interface in media art coincided with the emergence of the internet. Accordingly, the surprising novelty of a new kind of agency in and involvement with screen-based art was underscored by a more pervasive, utilitarian literacy that was becoming habitual and, therefore, no longer spectacular.

2. Mobility

The global ecology of mobile telephony has *détourned* prehensile dexterity acquired at the computer keyboard into the intimate realm of personalised gadgetry. Its expanding universe of "apps" continues to multiply the availability of things to do at any time of the day. How can an emerging media artist possibly compete with iFart Mobile?

3. Social networking

The ambient nature of contemporary communications has created the "virtual republic" described by McKenzie Wark in his book of the same name (Wark, 1997). From Facebook to YouTube and Twitter, myriad forms of domestic or pedestrian cultural distraction continue to rival art of any kind.

4. Consolidated revenue

Funding and curatorial bodies such as ANAT and Experimenta still provide *dedicated* support to media arts. The dissolution of the New Media Arts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts in 2005 signalled the conclusion that dedicated support for media art was no longer necessary and that the Oz Co's work was done in underwriting its place as an established practice alongside music, literature and the other lively arts.

5. Curatorial politics

The conspicuous shift away from sponsoring and exhibiting media art within the Australian Centre for the Moving Image has left an equally conspicuous hole in public access to, and perception of such work as an ongoing practice. If represented at all, it is branded as a sub-genre of "the moving image".

I chose not to list the leviathan of gaming culture. Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the All Saints' church to kick-start the Reformation. I see no need for such excess in this instance.

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