

G E E R T L O V I N K

New Media, Technology and the Arts Unhappy Marriage or Perfect Synthesis?

Why is new media arts perceived as such a closed and self-referential scene?
Why can't artists who experiment with the latest technologies be part of pop culture and the arts market?

What's the after-effect of the 'exuberant' dotcom era? And why is there such a subordinate attitude towards academic science within new media arts? And is the educational sector the only way out?

In what follows, I am reluctant to list specific examples of artworks for fear of diluting the general argument. Of course Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Stelarc and Jodi are successful artists. But none of them can be seen at Biennales, which is still stuck in the age of cheap, straightforward video projections. Each and every argument I present here can be falsified with references to specific art works that prove the opposite of what I am trying to prove. What I am interested in is the broader tendency in which new media arts currently exists — a situation I will argue is unnecessarily constraining at a time of rapid commercial development and social uptake of new media forms. Besides a critical examination of the premises — and the very existence — of 'electronic arts', I am making an argument to simultaneously attack the elitist tendencies within the "contemporary arts" system that reproduce a retrograde distinction between the fakery of the special effect and the authentic struggle of "real" artists with the raw image. In the second part of this essay I will summarize a recent debate in Australia in response to the decision of the federal arts funding agency to dismantle its separate "new media arts" board. Is it better to integrate new media arts into the existing structures or do we get more interesting works if technology-based arts has its own funding structures, media labs and centres?

There is a growing tension —not to say open rivalry— developing between art forms and their institutions. This can mainly be blamed largely on the outgoing post-war 68-gener-

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Seiko Mikami, Sota Ichikawa *Gravicells - Gravity and Resistance* transmediale.05 Exhibition 2005



Venzha & the house of natural fiber CAUS#3 transmediale.05, Performance 2005

ation and their greedy careerism that is now aimed at maximizing their superannuation. Their collective metamorphosis from progressive and experimental to a defensive, conservative attitude is phenomenal. Its history has yet to be written. Why should most of the funding these days go to opera? What is so intriguing about dead painters? Why should techno and “urban culture” be left to the market?

There is no philosophical ground to distinguish so-called “contemporary” from so-called “new media” art. Both are deeply digital, inundated in visual culture. They have so much common ground. The successful integration of 70s and 80s video art into the artistic mainstream is a good example of how intertwined “contemporary arts” and

“new media arts” are. Perhaps Luhmann and Bourdieu, who both wrote about art as institutional practice, can help us out here. Art struggles these days can no longer be understood in metaphysical terms because they primarily grow out of petty politics. Art can only be understood within institutional contexts. Even the market –in neo-liberal, metaphysical terms of supply and demand- plays a secondary role. Most art historians and critics are useless in informing us about these underlying tendencies because they are themselves part of the existing system, imprisoned I would even say, and only reproduce existing tensions and confusions. As does much current art.

What is striking about the “contemporary arts” system is its admiration for the raw image. Unlike new media arts, the “true” art video, DVD or website has to be primitive. The sublime is sought in the accidental. Most videos shown at exhibitions, biennales and in galleries have a deliberate, amateur-like look, as if it is documentation of “found performances”. This open reference, and dedication, to reality TV (and other forms of “amateur” television) and home videos is

positioned in contrast to the slick look of advertising and Hollywood production values. It is into this binary division, this either/or, that “techno” art—which actually pays attention to editing, composition and rhythm—gets placed as commercial imagery. The quasi-clumsy art video style bets on the possibility of becoming authentic in itself without having to return to the object phase of the arts. It is not the artificial or the animated that potentially turns a digital file into an artwork. It is not the canvas of the painter or stone of the sculptor that is real—it is the unedited video, lacking any special effect. Emerging artists, who since the mid nineties have positioned their video works as gallery art, and who consciously avoided being identified with the technologies they used, have used this strategy effectively. Their lack of sophisticated equipment, software and knowledge has worked to their advantage. As soon as they discovered this need for the “digital raw” they made excellent use of this market opportunity. They did not change their style when got better equipment. Unlike in the twenties and thirties, when avant-garde was obsessed with montage, framing, light etc., today’s media works can only become art if they shift focus, meaning and context of a recorded situation. It is the subtlety of this shift that makes them classify as “art”. Experimentation is not encouraged. Knowledge of the internal power structures of tools amongst these artists is lacking. Also a basic understanding of the architectures of networks is missing. This is the age of the digital unconscious. The “digital natives” (those who grew up with computers) are experts in the consumption of lifestyles. Their skills are mind-blowing—and so their political ignorance of the very tools they fool around with. They surf the media waves, but have no clue of the underlying mechanisms. In fact, young “contemporary artists” give the appearance of believing that they will become compromised if they identify themselves too much with their digital cameras, laptops and software. They will be out of fashion with curators and critics as soon as they show an interest in editing, animation and other techniques of image manipulation. Because, in the end, that’s the domain of the “creative industries”, not real art.

The birth of new media is closely tied to the democratisation of computers. According to some it is an art form born out of the *Geist* of Fluxus with its video art and performance. Others stress the influence of seventies public access activities or electronic music and then the post-industrial art and activism of the eighties. The term “new media art” only arrived as a set of practices in the late eighties, and is specifically tied to the rise of desktop publishing and the

production of CD-ROMs. Internet involvement started relatively late, from 1994-95 onwards, after the World Wide Web had been introduced. New media art is first of all part of the larger “visual culture” context. While it has strong ties to written discourses, computer code, sound, as well as abstract and conceptual art and performance, we can nonetheless say that the visual arts element forms the dominant thread. The problem with these accounts of the “beginnings” of new media art however is their overemphasis on individual artists and their works. Such accounts lack institutional awareness. Whereas technology developed fast, institutional understanding in this sector has been equally slow. In this respect, new media art is a misnomer, since, time and again, it reproduced the modernist dilemma between aesthetic autonomy and social engagement. Add the word “art” and you create a problem. In the case of new media arts there was—and still is—no market, no galleries, few curators and critics, and a relatively specialist audience, bordering on “cult”. And most of all: there is no “supremacist” feeling of acting as an avant-garde. What is lacking here is historical confidence. Instead, there is a strong sense of conducting “minor” practices in the shadow of established practices such as film, visual arts, television and graphic design.

Agreed, political climates in different countries vary wildly. Whereas “e-culture” funding in the Netherlands has gone up over the past years, the situation in Berlin, Paris and London, for instance, remains bleak. Academia remains a safe haven in the USA with little cultural funding available elsewhere. Yet, within new media arts, it is clear that there is a deep level of stagnation and this needs to be analyzed. This critique is not meant to disdainfully look down on the “yawning vacancy of the technological sublime.” New media arts are not a single entity. It is “searching” and does not primarily focus on grand narratives or finished works that can be purchased in a gallery. They are forms in search of a form. As test beds they obviously lack content. Many of the works are neither “cool” nor ironical, as so many pieces of contemporary art are. Instead, they often have a playful, slightly naïve feel. Electronic arts, a somewhat older term that is sometimes used as a synonym for new media arts, is an experimental setup rather than an established discipline that highly depends on the cultural parameters set by engineers. Many of the key players in the field position their practice in the fragile zone between “art” and “technology”, which is asking for trouble. Because, what does it mean to have to please both computer scientists and art curators? Neither the art world nor ICT professionals are fans of electronic arts. Wunderkammer artworks are not in big demand. From the geek perspective they are made by users, not developers. New media artworks “apply” new technologies and do not contribute to its further development. For the art professionals, on the other hand, new media art belongs in educational science museums and amusement parks rather than contemporary arts exhibitions. If we read the mainstream critics, art should transmit Truth and Emotion. In today’s society of the spectacle there is no place for halfway art, no matter how many policy documents praise new media arts for its experimental attitude and Will to Innovate.

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In December 2004 the Australia Council announced its intention to disband the New Media Arts Board and the Community Cultural Development Board. These Boards gave grants respectively to artists working in new media and to communities such as disadvantaged youth, prison inmates and the homeless. I would like to summarise some of the responses on the Australian mailing list for new media research & culture, Fibreculture. Paul Brown writes that it has always been his opinion “that setting up special funding bodies essentially marginalises the practice and allows the conservatives to defer acknowledgment of the inevitable.” While Danny Butt appreciates that artists may not want to be pigeonholed, it is his understanding “that you could always apply pots of money to the other and compete on your merits against the landscape painters if you were that concerned about it. This move [by the Australia Council] represents a suppression of the new, the emergent and the political in favour of the known and the commercial (high art is big business).”

Theorist Anna Munster played an important role in the debate and strongly criticised the Council’s decision. On Fibreculture she wrote, “We now live deeply immersed in informationalism as a cultural, social and political set of circumstances. We need fields and infrastructure to support responses to and experiments with this. It doesn’t matter whether the New Media Arts Board is stuck in a semantic loop about the term ‘new media’. The point is that a huge amount of very interesting and extraordinarily experimental work here in Australia would not have been done without it.” Munster points to the future of the young generation. “Where will our younger and emerging artists who are feeding and living off information culture go for support now? They will be forced into making tiny amounts of money doing web design, making ring tones, or doing cell clean-up whenever a blockbuster Hollywood production rolls into Fox studios. Or they will tread the grinding road into academia, which is probably going to be the next place new media gets cut anyway. Of course they/we have to do this kind of shit anyway in order to live and we attempt to sustain our more experimental practices through these avenues. The previous board supported a range of people that had more sustained periods of time to think through ideas and bring these to fruition. You just don’t get that kind of time without funding support.”

Anna Munster also points to the current “precarious” position of artistic practice that exists on the back of unpaid voluntary labour. “The notion that we are now moving —or should be— from welfare to commercialisation is simply adopting the glib election patter of the government. The economic times we live in, as artists comprise a mix of public and private sector restructuring in the light of global shifts towards a service-based economy. The reality for most artists is that they get a bit of public sector funding, a bit of sponsorship and then the rest of the time they sell their services to sustain their practice. Selling your services is the way in which artists currently self-sustain.”

Net artist and curator Melinda Rackham clearly benefited from the current structure. “Even if the board was a short term solution, it was a bloody good solution that other countries are following. It helped produce some fantasy work, created dialogue, and promoted our artists globally. And it worked for very little investment.” University of Queensland scholar Lucy Cameron points at another tendency: “There is a suggestion that in the future there will be less “new talent” funding and more “virtuous cycles” funding based on the track record of the institution you’re attached to — if you got grants/contracts before you’re more likely to get grants in the future — a process that is being supported by the current suggestion of the government that in Australia we’ll soon be reverting to a two-tier higher education system — one of teaching only and another, more elite teaching and research institutions. The overall effect of this US type free-market, bottom-up, endogenous growth philosophy is that it backs commercial capacity rather than individual talent.”

In an open letter to the chair of the Australia Council media artist Simon Biggs sums up some of the “secondary” aspects of new media arts, besides the central question if it is art (or not). “The emergence of new media art can be seen as valuable to society not only for the art that arises from it. Australia is a world leader in the new media industries and in part this is due to the well-documented interchange there has been between the experimental cultural practices that have happened in new media art and the commercial exploitation of these developments. Australia is also a world leader in education and, again, this has been enhanced notably by the emergence of new media arts specialist departments at many of Australia’s Universities and is also evidenced by the number of Australian artists employed at similar departments in Universities around the world.” But as Lucy Cameron already mentioned, success is mainly measured as individual talent and has not materialised itself in schools, networks, movements, and concepts or even in institutions. The new media arts funding of the Australia Council over the past decade has produced a field of dispersed, indeed highly trained and well-informed artists, who are now increasingly desperate as the necessary next phase of institutionalisation of the field has not happened. The

strategy to fund a number of small organisations and dissipate the little money there was between individuals has made the New Media Board, and the sector as a whole, an easy target.

This Brechtian Lehrstück from down under could lead us to the thesis that the true potential of new media art is in its ability to disappear. New media arts turn out to be a Hegelian project, aimed at its own transcendence. It is not a goal in itself, even though it obviously has self-referential tendencies, like all activities in society. In the short term, new media arts set out to discover the inner logic, standards and architectures of new technologies, but apparently this process can only last for a short while. The phase of experimentation will necessarily come to an end. Its findings will dissipate into society. ❖

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