

MEDIA ART, MEDIALITY AND ART GENERALLY

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Abstract

The wide ranging, trans-disciplinary interest in technological media suggests the possibility of a new discipline concerned with the history, implications and practice of mediation. Within this context, the field of media art gains a new sense of coherence and identity. Given the lingering tension between media art and mainstream contemporary art, this may lead the latter to assert its disciplinary autonomy. This paper argues against such a move. Media art is better positioned as an integral strand within contemporary art and, more particularly, as a key space of creative enquiry and practice within a generally conceived contemporary art education. Keywords: media art, mediality

In mid-2009 a number of our final year Media Arts students produced a show, “The Static Age”, at Performance Contemporary Artspace (Wollongong). Brodie McCaulay built fanciful home-grooming and beauty machines from bits and pieces of junk. Daniel Jones created an audio montage of media theory that played in a loop between two old reel-to-reel machines, one of which also drove a zoetrope animation of dancing skeletons. Jade Markham created a huge inflatable snow dome full of flowers and dead computers. She also produced a set of moulded jellies with embedded LEDs. Her project proposal described a key aim, to produce media art with cupcakes. Overall the show suggested sites of imaginative interplay between the domestic and the electronic, the anachronistic and the new.

What does this exhibition say about the student level perception of media art? It indicates an important shift in interest and orientation. Whereas a few years back, I saw mainly screen-based animation and interactive works, now the best work is installation based. It is less intent to demonstrate technical expertise or to employ the latest software. It opens up a dialogue with traditions of experimental art practice and self-consciously positions itself as art rather than as cutting edge new media. Moreover the conception of media has broadened, slipping free of the standard attachment to film, video, games and the Internet and suggesting a deeper engagement with the history and philosophical implications of mediation.

This expanded notion of media practice has emerged partly as a

consequence of the many efforts to explore the history and archaeology of technical media (in the work of authors such as Batchen, Kittler, Grau and Zielinski) and partly as a result of philosophical enquiry into the notion of mediation (drawing upon the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Stiegler and many others). In a blog post to a 2009 University of Siegen public debate, German media theorist Florian Cramer describes the influential German context: “In the last decade, German humanities have developed a broad, general and transhistorical notion of media as ‘mediality’ (*Medialität*) in which any material or imaginary carrier of information qualifies as a medium, from CPUs to angels” [1]. In his *Deep Time of the Media*, German media theorist Siegfried Zielinski provides a particularly engaging account of this new conception of media [2]. Adopting an archaeological approach and insisting that the history of media is not a tale of linear progress, Zielinski examines the rich historical strata of media experimentation. He considers, for instance, the Pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles’ conception of mediated perception, the alchemical, scientific practices of the 17th century polymath, Giovanni Battista della Porta, and the (electrically) dancing frogs of the 18th Century doctor of medicine, Luigi Galvani. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to tie all the historical themes and detail into a coherent notion of media, but the key conceptual motifs include: communication at a distance; the amplification, simulation and transformation of perception; secret codes and ciphers; and the shaping of generative and symbolic combinatory systems. Above all, Zielinski argues that the experimental tradition involves an indissoluble mix of rational enquiry and imaginative vision. His notion of media practice plays on the boundaries between science and art, and includes a strongly philosophical dimension. Questions of truth and appearance, presence and absence, technological and human, perception and language, finite and infinite, materiality and abstraction, essence and transmutation are integral to the historical field of practical media enquiry.

What are the implications of all this for how media art is positioned within the contemporary creative arts curriculum? Does media art represent a whole new area of disciplinary specialisation or is it better integrated

within existing programs? How can media art negotiate a place within contemporary art education while also working to reshape this space through a dialogue with technical and scientific disciplines? In my view, the emerging broad, conceptually nuanced and interdisciplinary conception of media suggests a rich space of creative exploration, but also risks losing disciplinary focus. Represented as an autonomous field, media art appears – certainly for prospective students – as an opaque discipline with no clear cultural context, technical basis or career outcomes. Given these difficulties, it may be preferable for media art to subsume itself within the diversity of contemporary art. The conceptually guided and materially focused space of art provides an appropriate site for experimental media art practice and a buffer against expectations of immediate industry relevance. But there is a difficulty – a lingering sense of cultural resentment that makes integration awkward.

Despite the global sway of video installation and digital production processes, media art still likes to imagine its marginal status within the contemporary art world. The sense of alienation is typically traced back to tensions between the cybernetic art of the late 1960s and the then-emerging paradigm of critical conceptual art [3]. In 1997, new media theorist Lev Manovich described the gap between ‘Turing-land’ and ‘Duchamp-land’, arguing that the two worlds represent radically antithetical cultural tendencies – evident in the split between specialised electronic art venues such as ZKM, ISEA and Ars Electronica and mainstream art galleries and exhibition contexts [4]. Closer to home, in his brief account of the history of Australian video art, curator and academic Daniel Palmer emphasises the continuing divide between media art and contemporary art. Particularly vivid is his description of the status of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI). Palmer argues: “ACMI [...] cast in concrete a split between media art and contemporary art; it was located right next door to the newly relocated and renovated National Gallery of Victoria, which found itself relieved of the pressure to properly represent and collect artists working with video” [5].

Contemporary art’s suspicion of media art is very evident in French curator Nicholas Bourriaud’s rejection of “facile

gadgets” [6] and the uncritical, illustrative character of experimental computer graphics [7]. He contrasts the false and overly literal interactivity of media art to the poetically conceived and properly human, dialogic space of relational aesthetics. More recently, debate on the *Nettime* mailing list has addressed the continuing awkward aesthetic status of media art. In a provocative post, Florian Cramer describes the unfortunate state of contemporary new media interactive installation: “A visitor who would visit an arbitrary new media festival with an interest in contemporary art would see, first and most of all, preposterous machine parks. Or, in friendlier terms, it’s the kind of art that rather belonged, as an educational or aesthetic gimmick, into a museum of technology than into a contemporary art discourse” [8].

Despite these comments, Cramer argues against efforts to re-build links to mainstream contemporary art. In his view, if media art is generally bad, the state of contemporary art is “even worse”, having retreated to the reactionary certainties of the white cube and “the good looking exhibition object” [9]. Within this context, he maintains a (slightly bruised) faith in the alienated space of media art: “I find it hard to get past a certain attachment to the ‘media art’ ghetto because it tends to combine the very worst (even painfully, unspeakably stupid and monstrously worst) with – IMO – the very best to be found in contemporary art” [10].

Without denying the real force of these contextual tensions, the weakness of this binary-oppositional conception is that it radically oversimplifies the relationship between media art and contemporary art and, at its worst, trades on very standard tropes of avant-garde difference. It envisages contemporary art as a monolithic entity with a clearly defined centre, periphery and excluded exterior. More usefully, however, contemporary art can be regarded as a shifting, multiple and de-centred terrain. Rather than existing at the margins, or beyond the limits, of contemporary art, media art appears as a node (or multiple nodes) within a more general and highly differentiated universe. As one of the respondents to Cramer’s post, artist Renee Turner, argues: “There are many different artworlds (and for that matter artists/inhabitants/vagrants). Sometimes they intersect, rub next to each other, come into agitation or simply run on parallel tracks” [11].

A major problem with the binary conception is that it fails to acknowledge media art’s real potential to affect the overall network of relations and to reshape the terrain of contemporary art. It is not as though media art is not equally concerned with issues of aesthetics, equally implicated within the conceptual space of art (however envisaged). Returning to the example of ACMI, while this new exhibition space certainly signals a gulf between late 90s techno-scientific media art (with its emphasis on virtuality, immersion and the elements of commercial popular culture) and recognised, conventional contemporary art, from a wider perspective it can be regarded as a strategic expansion of the urban cultural sector. ACMI and the National Gallery of Victoria are positioned differently but they share many affinities and communicate more than they fundamentally disagree. Indeed, communication, overlap and exchange between media art and contemporary art is so evident these days that the distinction between the two spaces now seems archaic and unnecessary. For example, some of the best work at the 2008 Sydney Biennale, such as Mike Parr’s use of the former naval academy on Cockatoo Island as a mixed installation, performance and projection space or William Kentridge’s installations, *What Will Come (Has Already Come)* (2007) and *I am not me, the horse is not mine* (2008) seamlessly incorporate media and the thematics of mediality and mediation within contemporary art. Kentridge’s work particularly represents an explicit reflection on the relation between drawing, mechanical illusion and industrial modernity.

Overall, media art represents less a distinct discipline or a clearly defined genre of artistic practice than a diverse site of creative engagement with a broader field of trans-disciplinary enquiry and debate focusing on the history and cultural implications of technological mediation. Contemporary media provides a key concern, but interest extends to all forms of cultural reproduction that involve dimensions of technically cast division, repetition and displacement. Within this context, media art can serve not only as a vehicle for unsettling and expanding the horizons of contemporary art, but also as a means of revisiting fundamental concepts and issues within art – notions, for instance, of creativity, medium,

system and interaction. It is this tension between apparent exteriority and curious intimacy that lends media art its critical purchase within contemporary art. This abrasive, ambivalent relation is lost if media art is positioned as an internally coherent, separate discipline. While I am well aware of the frustrations of trying to embed experimental media practice within the contemporary art curriculum, as well as all the very real temptations associated with going it alone (new buildings, labs, jobs, etc.), it seems preferable to persist with our (necessarily awkward) efforts at integration. In my view, media art represents an integral strand within a more generally conceived contemporary art education. Along the way, media art as a named discipline and genre of creative practice may effectively disappear, but this only signals its ubiquity and key importance.

References and Notes

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