Art After New Media

Title	Art After New Media
Subtitle	Not provided.
Lead-in / Abstract	Forming an introduction to the panel. Drawing on experience from the Walker Art Center, touring exhibitions and festivals, this presentation gives an overview of the issues for curating across the boundaries of educational, online, and physical contexts. It addresses (some of) the challenges for curating new media: classification, ghettoization, medium specificity, expectations, infrastructure, legal bugs, presentation, moving targets, participation, platforms, collaboration, collecting, popular culture.
Participants and speakers	Dietz, Steve (US)
Short biography of participants	Steve Dietz is the founding director and former curator of new media at the Walker Art Center, where he curated the online Gallery 9 (http://gallery9.walkerart.org). He has curated more than 10 exhibitions of online and onsite digital artworks, including "Beyond Interface" (http://www.yproductions.com/beyondinterface/), Art Entertainment Network (http://aen.walkerart.org),

Telematic Connections (http://telematic.walkerart.org),
and Translocations (http://translocations.walkerart.org)
and has written extensively on new media art.

Art After New Media

Since I first wrote on curating new media, *Curating (On) the Web* in 1997[1], I have
written and presented a number of times on the topic. I think it would be fair to say
that I have consistently - some might say repetitively - based my thinking on two
core tenets:

*Curating new media is just like curating any contemporary art, only different. The
most interesting potential for curating new media is how it might change the
practice of curating.*[2]

Regarding the first tenet, computational, interactive, networked media present
specific challenges for the curator and presenting organization. **Beryl**, and **Sarah's**
and **Caitlin's** papers all testify to how much better we understand these challenges
of curating new media on both a pragmatic and philosophical level. What I would
like to highlight, however, is how each presentation is either predicated, as with
Caitlin's paper, on new media as a non-exclusive category, equally applicable **Dan
Flavin's**[3] **Jodi's**[4]; Beryl's paper is shot through with examples of work, such as
Janet Cardiff's[5], which would not normally be identified as new media; and even
Sarah's paper makes the case, I would argue, for thinking about network-based art
as sharing elements of historical discourses around site-specific, installation and
performative art.

Leider (Artforum) to Baigell re Csuri

Indeed, as we shall see, curating new media art is just like any other curating only
different. Or, to phrase it in terms of my second tenet, curating new media art has
led to a richer understanding of curating other contemporary art.

So what does it mean to be discussing curating new media art in 2004?

I want to revisit a statement by the editor of Artforum[6] **Philip Leider**, to art
historian Matthew Baigell in a letter dated On October 30, 1967.

"Thanks for the enclosed manuscript on *CHuck CsuriI*[7] cant [sic] imagine
ARTFORUM ever doing a special issue on electronics or computers in art, but one
never knows."

In fact, we do know that festivals such as Ars Electronica[7] SIGGRAPH[8], and ISEA[9]
itself have been doing "special issues" on computers in art for the past 25 years and
more.

Where has it gotten us? For one thing it has gotten us the knowledge of how to
curate and present new media art based on a great deal of experience, aspects of
which my colleagues outline in their papers.

For another thing, these festivals have been sites of experimentation that have
literally sustained a broad and varied international artistic practice that we now
understand as a set of rich histories of exemplary works and practices.

But has this made any difference in the contemporary art world in general or the
general public for that matter?

One could make the case that with the Walker Art Center[10] dismantling its
curatorial new media efforts, with SFMOMA[11] losing its new media-savvy curator,
with this year's Whitney Biennial[12] not having a new media program per se, with
Steve Kurtzof[13] Critical Art Ensemble in court that the United States, at least, is
regressing. On the other hand, with so many media festivals in Europe and the rest
of the world that it seems like the well-heeled attendee could be on the road every
week of the year[14] with the Arts Council of England acquiring new media art for its
collection[15], with a kind of giddy interest in locative media[16] and pervasive
computing[17] that is reminiscent of the heyday of net art, with the rise of amazing

new institutions such as Sarai[18] one could make the case that new media art is alive and flourishing.

It is difficult to know which of these metrics to use to assess the issue, but wandering around SIGGRAPH[19] last week and ISEA[20] this week, it has been notable to me the number of committed curators, theorists, and artists who have been nonplussed; not just by the work in front of them but by much of the work they have seen presented recently in general. And even when there is work they admire and champion, many will admit, as one prominent curator put it to me recently, that there does not seem to be a public for it. "Our institution can't get by just on digital art," this curator argued.

I hesitate to chalk up this attitude up to any one issue, but there is surprising unanimity on one point by artists, curators, and theorists alike. Whether accurate or not, many remain convinced that there is too much emphasis on what is often referred to as "techno-formalism." I should emphasize that **Tapio Makela** organized ISEA2004 as a set of networked, wearable, and wireless experiences specifically to counter "techno fetishist approaches where technologies themselves are seen as the center of attention."[21]

Why? Why after more than 30+ years of experience and such explicit rhetoric against techno formalism, does there remain, even among specialists, the perception of too much emphasis on techno-formalism?

It's a bit of a straw-question, of course. One person's techno-formalism is another person's profound exploration of the intersection of technology and society. More importantly, there is probably in these sentiments a conflation of techno-formalism and medium-specificity, which needs to be unpacked with greater nuance. And perhaps it is a kind of professional boredom of having seen it all before, somewhere else. But I think it is more than that. It remains of note to me how many of my colleagues, both artists and curators, feel a certain sense of desperation - to use too strong a word. Even as we seem to understand so much better what we are curating and how we are doing it, we are surprised by the ignorance and indifference expressed particularly by mainstream institutions but also by the general public, more than we would care to acknowledge.

In general, I have argued against the siren call of new media legitimation through inclusion in generic contemporary art shows. That was the old way, letting the few into the temple of art and holding them up as paragons of "real artists," who just happened to use computers. Now I would argue that any contemporary art show that does not include a new media work of art is probably just lazy, at best; nevertheless token inclusion remains an uninteresting goal.

And I continue to believe that new media works bring to the table new ways of experiencing art, which I do not want to sublimate to the larger category of "just art." As with photography, as with video, there are histories and modes of creation and presentation that are worth remembering and sustaining and promoting.

At the same time, as we develop our histories and alternative histories, it is increasingly clear what we have always known: new media art is not Pallas Athena from the head of Zeus. It has antecedents; it relates to many other contemporary works that may not be new media-based. The question is what is the future of new media art.

In the film *Sleeper*[22], the past from which the character played by Woody Allen awakens is just as inscrutable to his captors as their futuristic society is unbelievable to him. They have lost the context for the most "obvious" of artifacts, whether a portrait of **Richard Nixon** or a household vacuum cleaner. Perhaps at some not too unimaginable point in the future, a young curator of contemporary art may find the issues of the present day regarding what is sometimes referred to as "new media" and its curation equally opaque.

To promote this future vision, I propose that rather than continuing to almost exclusively present new media artwork in almost exclusively new media art contexts; rather than hoping mainstream institutions pay more attention to new media art; we assume a new moment of art after new media.

What would art after new media look like? I think it would look like the locative media works that Sarah discusses and include **Robert Smithson's** *Spiral Jetty*[23]. It would look like the variable media[24] the Caitlin describes; where new media has art has been the impetus to understand better and in a more generalized way all of contemporary art. And it would look like the interactive works that Beryl discusses, including both **Rafael Lozano-Hemmer**[25], a seminal new media artist, and **Rikrit**

Tiravangia[26], who has probably never been described as a new media artist.

In other words, new media has won. It is the only way we can adequately describe and understand contemporary art.

I just want to emphasize that this call for a curatorial practice of art after new media is not an either/or option. It does NOT mean that festivals such as ISEA and Ars Electronica or exhibitions of new media art should not exist - although I do not believe an expansion of the artists involved would be a bad thing - nor does it mean that mainstream art institutions should be given a pass. To the contrary, they need to take new media art as seriously, both philosophically and pragmatically, as any contemporary art they curate, present, and collect.

New media art is dead. Long live new media art.

- 1. http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/papers/dietz/dietz_curatingtheweb.html

- 2. For example, http://www.yproductions.com/writing/archives/000037.html Curating New Media International Curatorial Summit Banff New Media Institute August 25, 2000

- 3. http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_works_46_0.html

- 4. http://www.jodi.org

- 5. http://www.abbeymedia.com/Janweb/artwork.html

- 6. http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/index/mccormick/mccormick1-8-3.asp

- 7. http://www.siggraph.org/artdesign/profile/csuri/

- 8. http://www.aec.at/en/festival/index.asp?nocache=46706

- 9. http://www.siggraph.org/s2004/cfp/art/index.php?pageID=cfp

- 10. http://www.isea-web.org/eng/sympos.html

- 11. http://www.mteww.com/walker_letter/halbreich_letter.html

- 12. http://www.sfmoma.org/info/mushist_overview.asp

- 13. http://www.whitney.org/biennial/

- 14. http://www.caedefensefund.org/

- 15. http://rhizome.org/opportunities/index.php

- 16. http://www.hayward.org.uk/exhibitions/acc/txtacq.html

- 17. http://locative.net/

- 18. http://ubicomp.org/ubicomp2004/

- 19. http://www.sarai.net

- 20.

http://www.siggraph.org/s2004/conference/art/index.php?pageID=conference

- 21. http://www.isea2004.net/

- 22. Tapio Makela, "Tracing Histories of the New: Waypoints on the ISEA2004 Logbook," in ISEA2004 12th International Symposium on Electronic Art.

- 23. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070707/

- 24. http://www.spiraljetty.org/

- 25. http://variablemedia.net/

- 26. http://www.fundacion.telefonica.com/at/rlh/eprlh.html

- 27. http://adaweb.com/context/artists/tiravanija/rtbio.html

The full text is available as an attachment. Please download it here.

Related internet addresses

http://www.variablemedia.net/
http://www.yproductions.com
http://www.newmedia.sunderland.ac.uk/crumb/