

NEW MEDIA AND EXHIBITION MAKING: SOME FORECASTS

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While 'trophy' new media works have been readily absorbed into traditional institutional formats and have contributed to the attraction of larger and more diverse audiences, curators must continually strive to counter the weight of inherited exhibition protocols if visitors are to engage with emerging technologies in their fullest artistic sense – as subject, methodology and medium.

The attention given by the art world to 'new media' has recently escalated as evidenced by the more and more technically ambitious viewing experiences that are being staged by its institutions for our edification and delight. This 'turn' in exhibition making towards the kinaesthetic has coincided with the rise of neurological accounts of perception which are not only being popularised in all aspects of culture but which artistic organisations are now seeking and expected to apply in their civic roles as leaders of individual and collective creativity, learning and well-being.

Exhibition practices in general also reflect a re-emergence of a sense of wonder and the recuperation of non-logic based knowledge systems in the world's dominant societies. New media works which are prized for their 'immersive' and 'interactive' attributes are being installed in ways that set up a 'magical' space in which there is a disarming effect that offers a respite from 'disbelief'. Cultural and intellectual trajectories that are re-asserting a relationship to nature that emphasises the confluences between nature and technology are informing the practices of many of these artists.

The presentation of new media works is influencing the overall design of exhibitions. There has been a move away from the sparse exhibition layouts that reached their zenith with last century's High Modernism. The trend has been towards more crafted, theatrical spaces. Whether it is architectural practitioners being curated into biennales to stage interventions in the built fabric of the exhibition or the alignment of museum attendance with the 'experience economy' of leisure and shopping, institutions of all complexions are imagining the 'space' of the exhibition far more intently.

Exhibitions are being increasingly understood as sites of interchange in which the processes by which artists conceive of the reception of their work are built upon. Much curating is now predicated on the assumption that the relationships that coalesce around exhibitions are constantly shifting and is being explicated to varying degrees within exhibitions. In some cases, the distinctions between the production, presentation and the reception of work are blurring so that the notion of the exhibition is being simultaneously conceptualised as more fundamental and as more contingent across the art world.

The greater efficacy that is being ascribed to the form of the exhibition has meant that major institutions are committing larger and larger amounts of resources to their realisation, arguably to match mounting visitor expectations. In order to secure 'trophy' works, they are entering into joint commissioning and acquisition relationships with each other, and are re-developing their sites to accommodate them.

These kinds of works are being absorbed into traditional institutional formats while also contributing to the adaptation of these conventions to successfully attract larger and more diverse audiences. At the same time, the most spectacular of the works occupy a position in their institutions that has an equivalence to the status accorded 'old masters'. Often held up as evidence of an institution's contemporaneity, these works can be readily sidelined from an institution's necessary contestatory processes and have a consensualising effect because of the collective relief that accompanies 'everyone loving them'.

Consequently, they are installed so that there is an over-emphasis on their effect. My experience of volunteer and professional staff in galleries being able to explain transfer processes used in printmaking but not in digital works reflects the manner in which organisational factors support this 'splendid isolation'. In instances in which works are installed without the provision of a nuanced context that includes considerations of criticality, they can function in the manner that venerated objects were and still are displayed.

In such situations, curators continue to be highly selective in the way that they work with artists engaging with the materials and vocabularies of emerging technologies. These artists have practices that are performative, participatory, take up user-generated content, posit continuities between physical and virtual spaces, and arise out of a distributed rather than a single sensibility. Curators establish a dialogue with the object-based strands of an artist's practice while avoiding the less traditional aspects. More commonly, they present durational or relational aspects in such a way that audiences mistake them for documentation or interpretation of the artist's practice. Their curatorial approach cannot accommodate artists and audiences who insert themselves into the interpretative dimension of exhibitions. Even with the best intentions, the market will champion and audiences will continue to defer to the object unless curators continually strive to counter the weight of inherited exhibition protocols.

Exhibition formats have not kept up with the aspirations of many artists working in new media and traversing disciplines. These artists range across the formerly discrete sites of the studio, laboratory, workshop and gallery so that these locations become the spatial coordinates of an expanded field of relational energies. These energies are unwieldy and dispersed in character and do not observe opening hours. While compelling they are extremely difficult to curate into exhibitions. Nevertheless, artists of all persuasions continue to want to be in exhibitions no matter how critical they may be of institutions and audiences are drawn to this enduring form.

As institutions expand the range of technologically inflected practices that they present, visitors increasingly encounter technology in its fullest artistic sense - as subject, methodology and medium. It becomes more possible for the arresting sensations associated with new media installations, for example, to be positioned closer to rather than parallel with the complexities of networked digital technologies in our lives. The limitations of terms such as 'affect', 'perception' and 'attention' that have rapidly solidified around the term 'new media' can be tested as practices engaged with the technologies and perspectives of web 2.0 generate a raft of responses that cannot be summed up as either scopic or embodied. The mainstream art world's reliance on binary distinctions that simplistically associate 'contemplation' with the 'cognitive' and 'interaction' with the 'affective' can be more thoroughly questioned.

It exceeds the scope of this text to analyse where and why these cultural and institutional and ultimately aesthetic shifts are underway. My observations have arisen out of a practice that upholds the distinctiveness of the curatorial role and the form of the exhibition - although now extending beyond

gallery walls to encompass off-site and online spaces. Many exhibitions of new media work would be more incisive if there was greater investment in the relationship of curators and artists. As well as the technical skills associated with framing and facilitating a context for artists' work, curators bring historical, theoretical and audience considerations to the attention of artists in their ongoing relationships with them.

There is crucial work to be done to ensure that media artists are not cut off from opportunities associated with the market, critical writing and publishing. Curators have the capacity to assert the value of the small scale, the modest and the ephemeral whilst attending to the currency of spectacle and the spectacular in contemporary art. New approaches to exhibition making that allow emerging strands of practice to interpolate the discourse of aesthetics and that contribute to debate about what sorts of criteria traditionally associated with connoisseurship should be applied to new media are needed. Curatorial strategies have fallen too far behind theoretical discussion about the relationship between contextually-generated work and artistic considerations.

The form of the exhibition is, of course, culturally loaded and highly codified. With scrutiny, however, evolving exhibition formats can continue to do what exhibitions do best which is to link the display of artists' work to branches of philosophy such as aesthetics and ethics by stimulating curiosity and enjoyment, engendering contemplation, and fostering a sense of history and society. These convictions should in no way determine what exhibitions look like. It is about what they do. (1)

References and Notes:

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