

## ISEA AND THE INTER-SOCIETY

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### ABSTRACT

This short paper discusses the revival of the original aim of the ISEA symposium: the founding of a network organization for (what we now call) 'the emergent arts.'

### INTRODUCTION

At ISEA2013 in Sydney a panel discussion was staged to reconsider the original aims of ISEA. The original aims had been strived after in the early years of ISEA, around 1990, but then they gradually faded into the background. This was marked by the decision, in 2006, to turn the originally founded association "ISEA, Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts," into the foundation "ISEA International." The title of the 2013 panel consequently was: "The Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts revived?." [1]

The name 'Inter-Society' perfectly reflects the original reasoning behind the organisation of the First International Symposium on Electronic Art, in 1988. The symposium was meant to assemble representatives of all kinds of organisations and institutes active on the emergent field of the 'electronic arts' and, from then on, to have them co-operate. Part of the felt need to start this co-operation was a feeling in those early days that may be less relevant today. It had become clear, in those years, that the traditional division of disciplines in the arts was rapidly becoming outdated through developments in electronic technology. The worlds of computer graphics and of computer music had not really met yet. The graphics people met at SIGGRAPH and the musicians met at the International Computer Music Conference (both as of 1974, co-incidentally). The first ISEA symposia were instrumental in bringing these worlds together. However, the need to have the organizations and institutes work together, with the Inter-Society as a structure to facilitate this, had a deeper grounding than the fact that the division of artistic disciplines had become old-fashioned.

### CATAclysm

In 2013 I formulated this deeper grounded need as follows (in the shape of a 'Mini Manifesto'). [2]

- We live in a world that is governed by economic laws.
- Meanwhile, history is being governed by expansion of human knowledge, both encompassing insight and imagination or science and art, together known as culture.
- The development of science and its practical application, technology, is extremely fast, providing for rapid changes in production, medicine, social life etc.
- The economic motor requires us to consider every technological advance as a potential source of profit.
- This obscures our vision of future well-being on a global scale.
- In such a serious context, it is of essential importance that all artistic and creative initiatives that consciously aim at

grasping the implications of technological development, put their heads together and co-operate.

- The aim should be to structurally and systematically (in other words: *scientifically*) approach the artistic and creative potentials of our new age.

The main idea here is that the current state of science and technology is to a large degree beyond the grasp of non-experts. String theory is understood by laymen (like me) only in a very comprised, popularized way (let us say I can roughly follow Wikipedia's lemma) [3] and not in a way that would allow me to develop new insights based on it. In other words, for artists to work with the latest insights of scientists and on the frontiers of technology, it is essential they co-operate with scientists. The question is: how can we further this aim in a structural way? The answer to this question has been sought in the meeting of organisations of artists working with modern technology and organisations of scientists that are open to artistic thinking. Thus the idea of the Inter-Society.

Since the Inter-Society was founded in 1990, the number of organisations and institutes of artists that work with state of the art technology has at least quadrupled. The pressure for fundamental changes in society has increased simultaneously. To put it in the words of my late Indian teacher Ciranjiva Roy: The world is "running headlong for its inevitable cataclysm." [4]

### PHILOSOPHY

In this paper I do not have the pretention to 'prove' that art and science need to cooperate in order to find ways out of the crisis the world is in. Authors much wiser than me have written about it. [5] Let us say, I am a believer. I believe emotion and rationality are two faculties of human consciousness and together they make a whole. Both science and art have been driven apart by history and they need each other to help us get out of the difficulties we have worked ourselves into.

However, in this context it may be worthwhile to point to the growing influence of so-called post-modernism in the social sciences, when the belief in Marxist analysis diminished after the 60's and 70's of the last century. The Frankfurter Schule was a very influential sociological movement originating in pre-WWII Germany and flourishing in the USA, where many of the protagonists (i.e. Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer) fled to, after the Nazis came into power. Like Marx, they based their thinking on the work of the phenomenologist thinker and dialectical theorist Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). In this vision, art plays an important ideological role. This role is, however, not always positive. There was a tendency among his followers to plead for 'ideologically correct art,' although Marcuse, for example,

recognised the 'autonomy' of the art experience as a way to understand truth via emotions. [6] In general, the 'Frankfurters' agreed on a very negative influence they attributed to popular culture – in their view sharply distinguishable from 'high' art.

In the social and cultural sciences this vision lost power to the dominantly French school of postmodernism. Via intermediaries such as Roland Barthes, who analysed popular culture as the hidden (or tacit) expression of an ideology supporting capitalism, the attention shifted to thinkers like Baudrillard, Derrida and Foucault. They took the ideological analysis a step further; as it were from the idealism of Hegel to the cultural pessimism of Nietzsche. According to the post-modernists, all culture consists of signs and that includes both art and science. The very language in which social scientists or philosophers describe reality is ideologically coloured. This has a self-destructive aspect, because it invites us to analyse the language in which an argument or a theory is formulated or even 'proven,' and to not deal with the theory itself. It takes us away from what is being communicated and concentrates on how it is communicated. [7] That means that the postmodern philosophy itself is doomed to disappear because the only thing that should interest us, according to its ethos, is *how* it is communicated.

At the same time the destructive aspect of post-modernism has a creative result. The 'method' for post-modernist analysis is called 'deconstruction.' If social reality is a (social) construction, [8] we need to *de-construct* this reality in order to understand it and change it. A consequence of this way of thinking is seen in efforts by researchers to escape from the harness of the normally used languages (and methods) and look for new ways to research and describe reality. This develops into *artistic approaches to science*. In an ISEA2004 paper Finnish researcher Jussi Jauhiainen suggested, if I understood what he was saying correctly, that we could analyse (changing) cityscapes through *dance!* [9]

In line with this development, Dutch art schools, that in the past were sometimes connected to vocational technical education, but never to education at the level of the university, nowadays need to enter into 'academic research.' This is part of a wider movement, stimulated by the Dutch government, to connect vocational higher education to scientific research. To this end, academic researchers, called Lectors, are connected to (i.e.) the art schools. They are supposed to help the teaching staff to become (academic) researchers. I have witnessed rather confusing discussions between lectors and art school teachers, usually practicing artists themselves. The artists/teachers maintained that a substantial part of their art practice consisted of research already. There was clearly a meeting going on between the artistic and the academic definitions of 'research.'

The above is the result of "Bologna," or more correct "the Bologna Accords, a series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries," a "process [that] has created the European

Higher Education Area." [10] The Bologna Covenant implied the introduction, in practically all European countries, of the Anglo-Saxon bachelor-master system. [11] This is a very important development for anyone interested in the co-operation between art and science in general and for ISEA in particular.

## STANDPOINTS

ISEA should be, could be and already is, the place where this meeting, this search for new definitions and for new ways to study reality - while at the same time being part of that same reality and constantly influencing that - takes place. There are many more 'believers' in the need for art and science to co-operate and create synergy and these are the people the idea of the Inter-Society is aimed at. As Peter Beyls formulated it in the context of the 2013 panel: "A rigorous meta-organisation should offer support that any of its substituent members cannot obtain in isolation. This has to do with emergent functionality; the synthesis of both material means and knowledge to foster the creative contribution to (electronic) culture in a global networked society. Consequently, ISEA's responsibility is primarily a social one; the creation of a platform to stimulate international interdisciplinary collaboration." And Bonnie Mitchell added: "*Collectively, art and technology organizations together can help to raise awareness and incite action to deal with pressing global issues that would be very difficult to solve alone.*" [12]

It was one of the participants of the first ISEA Symposium, in 1988, where the decision to found the Inter-Society was taken, who publicly asked, during ISEA2012, 'where the Inter-Society had gone' (or such words). Roger Malina, for many years in charge of the International Society for the Arts, Sciences & Technology (ISAST) and its journal Leonardo, was also the person who coined the term 'Inter-Society' for the envisioned network organisation during the founding meeting in 1988. To answer Roger's question the panel session mentioned before was organised at ISEA2013: a panel that asked the question: 'The Inter-Society revived?' As happens at discussions of ISEA at ISEA, there was much talk about the symposium and on how that could be improved. Here I will concentrate on what answers actually were given to the panel's question. By the way, it is my profound conviction that the best ideas to revive the (idea of the) Inter-Society, coincide with the best ideas to improve the symposium.

It was again Peter Beyls who formulated the main questions at hand: (1) "*how ISEA could develop as a coordinating agency, positively feeding back to a myriad of cultural players worldwide* and (2) "*integrate strategic expertise from a number of major cultural sister-organisations.*"

Beyls' own answer to those questions was a call for "*public debate in order to optimise ISEA's mission in all instrumental dimensions.*" This public debate would logically and necessarily have to take place at the ISEA symposium. In Ernest Edmonds' words "*ISEA has provided the primary international meeting*

*place for artists, curators and others working in the electronic arts since its inception 25 years ago"*

However, although many ISEA goers are habitués, who have attended many of the symposia and are interested in the future direction of ISEA, most people mainly come to 'network,' 'see their professional friends' or, a little more seriously, as Vicky Sowry formulated it in her panel piece: "I go to ISEA for program research: to see who is doing what, where and how." And beside the 'regular customers' each ISEA symposium attracts a large crowd of people who haven't been to an ISEA before. This is partly a result of ISEA's nomadic character. All of these participants, both the regulars as the newbies may have some interest in discussing the future of ISEA, but for none of them it is their primary reason to come to ISEA. In fact, Vicky Sowry hit the nail on the head when she stated: "*it is essential that research be undertaken to identify what is of value to which group of attendees and what the barriers/incentives to attending ISEA really are for each of these groups .*"

This research is not as easily undertaken as it seems. Anne Nigten stated in her panel contribution: "*the nomadic ISEA structure brings along a risk of unfinished strands of theory and disjointed debates.*" Nevertheless, such research is necessary and can be staged. In fact ISEA International has developed several instruments to measure the interests of the participants of each symposium in the shape of surveys. One survey is aimed at the symposium participants and is the responsibility of the symposium host, another one is aimed at the symposium host and conducted by ISEA International. These surveys need to be expanded, improved and specified and will bring more insight. However, they are aimed at the current series of symposia and the current audiences and at the improvement of the quality of the symposia. In this paper, we wanted to look beyond that and look at the chances of ISEA becoming the network organisation for the emergent arts. This implies reaching out to a specific audience, not just the random participants.

### WAY AHEAD

ISEA International has formulated guidelines for the hosts (usually universities or art schools) that organise an ISEA symposium. These guidelines are a living document, because the insights develop and change on what the organiser needs to know, what parts of the event need to be (contractually) secured in order for ISEA to maintain a recognisable identity, safeguard ISEA International, the (present and future) host as well as the participants from unwanted incidents and last but not least to adjust to the changes caused by the development of the technological context. In my opinion ISEA needs to add a new chapter to these guidelines. A chapter that will describe a road towards ISEA Symposia becoming network events, not only for individuals, but for organisations and institutes. The 2013 panel contributed a number of practical ideas to accelerate this process:

- Stimulate participants to organise so-called "*Birds-of-a-Feather (BoF) meetings at ISEA*" (Roger Malina)
- Stimulate people that co-operate remotely (and that happens a lot in the electronic art world) and relevant organisations with dispersed membership to physically meet annually at ISEA
- ISEA International could be "*linking with the other growing set of specialist meetings in the area*" (Ernest Edmonds). Some of these are as old as ISEA or even older (Ars Electronica, ACM SIGGRAPH, International Computer Music Conference etc.) and we have contacts and some co-operation with them already, but there are many more new organisations and meetings. And, the next step: we could "*have partner events, especially [with partners] from science and technology fields.*" (Anne Nigten)

All this would be a beginning. It is of course not enough. ISEA might be a convenient meeting place and many organisations are already present at ISEA, officially or unofficially (and those terms don't mean much in the world of artists or scientists). But that is by far not enough. If ISEA is going to be a network organisation, it will need to give all partners in this network a voice on the future direction and content of ISEA.

Vicky Sowry: "*Networks arise and grow through demonstrated, not assumed, interest and need.*" There needs to be a real incentive for (groups of) people to co-operate. Pooling scarce means might have decisive advantages in the current, almost world-wide art-unfriendly political circumstances. Still, "*diverse ideologies could complicate a merger*" and "*hierarchies inherent in organizational entities often clash with open-source community approaches to decision-making.*" (Bonnie Mitchell) All true. But above all: "*many art and technology organizations claim to be defining the future while actually clinging to the past.*" (Bonnie Mitchell again) In other words: don't use yesterday's solutions for today's problems. In this vein: "*We don't want a federation.*" (Roger Malina)

The organisations and institutes that might organise their meetings at ISEA, either among themselves, bilateral or on a larger inter-connecting scale, must also be part of its governing. How this should be realized, I don't know. It should be a subject of discussion, staged at ISEA. The original idea of the Inter-Society as a membership organization with organizations and institutes as its members is certainly an idea of the past century. And it did not work then either. We will need to use the Internet as the place where we can work together and map the road ahead.

"*Clear vision of what ISEA is and wants to be in the coming years seems to be essential.*" (Roger Malina) This vision must be further developed in dialogue with our intended partners. This could be done, as Anne Nigten suggested, by using "*the nomadic structure to become a learning organization; [create] a learning back-office [in the shape of] a light-weight, a task oriented team of specialists.*" We (all) will first have to see the need for co-operation. Then we have

to co-operate in a way that these needs are met and find a way to 'stabilise a dynamic network.' That would be the Inter-Society.

Thanks to Ernest Edmonds for correcting my English!

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