MEDIA ART, MEDIALITY AND ART GENERALLY

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Submitted: 26 March 2010

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 reel machines, one of which also drove a video art, curator and academic Daniel Jones. 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 Galvini. 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 combinatorial 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
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

9. Cramer [1].
10. Cramer [1].