

Media Art: Mediality and Art Generally

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Abstract

How does the notion of mediality, as an expanded conception of media, affect media art. If the concept of media art practice was once chiefly concerned with modern technological forms of audio-visual representation (photography, film, video, etc.) and then, under the guise of 'new media', developed a primary concern with the implications of the digital (electronics, computation and networked interaction), then where are we now? What are the artistic traditions, forms of practice and bodies of theoretical understanding that lend disciplinary coherence to media art? My particular interest is in how media arts is positioned within the Australian higher-education context. More specifically, how does it relate to the apparently more general field of visual art? Is it better regarded as a distinct entity or as crucial new perspective within a mainstream visual art education? I am leaning towards the latter view, partly because the 'medial' conception of media art practice lacks general currency within Australia. There is the awkward assumption that media art will focus narrowly on conventional media and the teaching of industry-relevant media production skills. The field of visual art is at least slightly insulated from these expectations and may provide a better umbrella for experimental media arts practice. These issues are considered in relation to the development of the Media Arts program within the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong.

Keywords: media art, mediality

Introduction

This paper examines how the field of media art is positioned within tertiary creative arts education. More specifically, it considers issues faced in the development of the Media Arts program within the School of Art and Design at the University of Wollongong. A particular concern is how media art negotiates a place within contemporary art education while also, inevitably, reshaping the space and opening up a dialogue with technical, scientific and professional disciplines. A related issue is how media art is affected by recent historical and philosophical investigation into notions of mediality, which represents media as a general cultural condition, extending well beyond the conventional forms of media associated with industrial and post-industrial modernity – photography, film, radio, television and the internet. The paper argues that the emerging broad, conceptually nuanced and interdisciplinary conception of media projects a rich space of creative exploration, but also risks losing disciplinary focus. This problem is particularly evident at university open nights and the like, where media art appears to prospective students and their parents as an opaque discipline with no clear cultural context, technical basis or career outcomes. Rather, however, than insist upon a complex disciplinary autonomy, this paper argues that it is preferable for media art to position itself as a vital current 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.

Outside/Inside/In-Between

Media Arts is a relatively small program at the University of Wollongong. It is placed alongside a long-standing Visual Arts program, which has major studios in painting, sculpture and textiles and minor studies in drawing, printmaking and photography, and a popular Graphic Design program, which specializes in print and web-based graphic design. Media Arts also forms half of a new degree program in Digital Media, which combines TAFE study in video, animation and special effects with university theoretical and practical media art subjects. This new program has considerable funding support. It will be housed in a new multi-million dollar building at the “Innovation Campus” with a full film and television studio, multiple computer labs, black-box installation spaces and a gallery. The Media Arts program occupies a curious position within this overall institutional arrangement. At one level, in its processes and outcomes, it is distinguished from the clearly artistic space of Visual Arts, but at another level, in its plainly experimental, art-focused character, it is separated from the professional dimensions of Graphic Design and Digital Media. Its position indicates tensions and dilemmas, raising questions concerning the self-identity of media art and its relationship to wider contexts of contemporary art and industry.

My interest here is particularly in the relation to a more general space of contemporary art. 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 60s and the then emerging paradigm of critical conceptual art (Gere 2002,102-109). In 1997, new media theorist, Lev Manovich, described the gap between “Turing-land” and “Duchamp-land”, arguing that the two worlds represented radically antithetical cultural tendencies; evident in the split between specialized electronic art venues such as ZKM, ISEA and Ars Electronica and mainstream art galleries and exhibition contexts (Manovich 1999). Closer to home, in his brief account of the history of Australian video art, curator and academic, Daniel Palmer, emphasizes 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. (Palmer 2007, 6)

The suspicion of media art is very evident in French curator, Nicholas Bourriaud’s, rejection of “facile gadgets” (Bourriaud 2002, 59) and the uncritical, illustrative character of experimental computer graphics (Bourriaud 2002, 68). 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 deliberately

provocative post, German media theorist, Florian Cramer, describes the sad consequences of the alliance between media artists and advanced academic research labs:

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. (Cramer 2009)

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” (Cramer 2009). Within this context, he maintains an eroded 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. (Cramer 2009)

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 center, periphery and excluded exterior. More usefully, however, contemporary art can be regarded as a shifting, multiple, 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:

[T]here 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. (Turner 2009)

The other 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 and mapped). Returning to the example of ACMI, while it certainly indicates a gulf between late 90s techno-scientific media art (with its emphasis on virtuality, immersion and the elements of commercial popular culture) and recognized, conventional contemporary art, it can also be regarded as a strategic expansion of the urban cultural sector. The two spaces are positioned differently but they share many affinities and communicate more than they disagree. Indeed, communication, overlap and exchange between media art and contemporary art is so evident these days that the distinction between ACMI and the Victorian Gallery of Art 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 within contemporary art. Kentridge's work particularly represents an explicit reflection on the relation between drawing, mechanical illusion and industrial modernity.

It is within this context that I have shifted to the view that Media Arts belongs as a studio within the Visual Arts program rather than as a distinct, separate area. Media Arts can still form part of Digital Media and still explore links to other Creative Arts programs, such as Sound Production and Creative Writing, and to programs in other faculties (such as Computer Science), but should establish its home within the more general context of a contemporary visual art education. This signals less a retreat from grand curricular autonomy than an effort to position media art as a significant strand within contemporary art practice and to clearly indicate its embeddedness in the visual art tradition.

Media Reconceived

Five of our final year Media Arts students recently rented a local Wollongong gallery for two weeks and put on their own show, "The Static Age". It contained all kinds of stuff. Brodie McCaulay created fanciful home-grooming and beauty machines from bits and pieces of junk. She also produced a short film that involved sewing on 35mm film. Daniel Jones created an audio montage of media theory that played in a loop between two old reel to reel machines, while a zoetrope animation of a dancing skeleton with shopping trolleys ran on top of one of the spinning reels. 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. She had written in her proposal that she wanted to produce media art with cupcakes, and the combination of the electrical/electronic and the bright and wobbly domestic was weirdly effective.



Figure 1: LED Jelly, Jade Markham. Copyright: the author.

What does all of this say about the student level perception of media art? For me it indicates a fundamental shift in interest and orientation. Whereas a few years back, I would have seen nothing but screen-based animation and interactive works, now the best work is plainly directed towards materiality and installation. It is less intent to

demonstrate technical expertise or to employ the latest software. It is also much more aware of its relation to traditions of experimental art practice. It is self-consciously art rather than cutting edge new media. Moreover the notion of media itself 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 the term.

Within this context it is worth mentioning that in 1984 - the final year of my undergraduate degree in Communication and Media Studies at the then Canberra College of Advanced Education – I had a choice between studying film or video production. Anybody with any kind of pretence to artistic ambition chose film. I chose video. Film was preferred because it linked to traditions of art cinema and because of its technical superiority – its higher resolution and richer tonal range. I liked video precisely because of its low resolution, ghosting and shimmering electronic color. Video represented a space of curious, visible immateriality. It provided a means of confronting what appeared to me as the central fascination of media: the manner in which mediation manifests presence as absence and absence as presence. Although at one level personal, this preference was clearly shaped by major currents of contemporary critical theory that stressed the primary displacement of language, text and representation. The point here is that my preference for video was not simply a preference for a specific technical medium. I chose video because it engaged with key issue of media generally – issues that gained further prominence and focus with the shift to digital media. The student exhibition described above indicates that now things have changed again. The media no longer represent a space of presence/absence. Or, more precisely, this quality is no longer what makes media fascinating. Now it is their imbrication in the material world – whether as the detritus of countless waves of technological innovation or in all kinds of experimental efforts to link media to immediate, space, time, corporeality and action. Rather than engaging with the pathos of being/non-being, media now somehow enables a return to the thinking of presence. Despite this flip in orientation, it is evident that the concept of media extends well beyond the technological specificity of celluloid, electronic or digital images. It engages fundamental aesthetic and philosophical concerns concerning the nature and consequences of mediation.

Although it has been available for many decades in strands of critical media theory, the notion of mediality seems to have taken coherent shape during the past decade. It 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, 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. (Cramer 2009)

In his *Deep Time of the Media* (2006), German media theorist, Siegfried Zielinski, provides a particularly engaging account of this new conception of media. 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 elements include: communication at a distance; the fashioning of illusions; transformation of materials; the development of hermetic codes; animating the inanimate; and the shaping of generative and symbolic combinatory systems. Above all, Zielinski argues that media experimentation involves an empirical approach and an indeterminate mix of rational enquiry and imaginative vision. His notion of media practice deconstructs the boundaries between science and art and demonstrates 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 media experimentation and enquiry.

While this broad conception of media (and media practice) has considerable potential for media art (and media art education), it should not reduce our central concern with the materiality and cultural configuration of contemporary media. There is a risk that the notion of mediality can provide a justification for historicism and antiquarian nostalgia. Zielinski avoids this risk by constantly reinterpreting present media in terms of the heterological character of past media. Traditions of natural philosophy and magic – experiments with mirrors, magnets, sulphur, lightning and gold – serve as vital means of illuminating and interrogating present concerns. It is precisely in terms of the need to develop novel solutions to current creative dilemmas that an exploration of past media - and an opening up of the notion of media generally - becomes meaningful. At a pragmatic pedagogical level, my experience is that the medial perspective makes clearest sense to students if it finds its way within both practical and theory streams. This is a very important issue within the context of our School because the Media Arts program lacks a separate theory program. After a generic eighteen months, students elect to pursue a sequence of either Visual Arts or Graphic Design theory subjects. Here, once again, my view is that there is no need for a separate Media Arts theory stream, rather the thinking of mediality is better located within a more general conception of visual art theory. This is really not a huge challenge. The practical and philosophical issues that the media perspective raise are already integral to the concerns of contemporary art. It is just a matter of lending them focus and coherence. This is not to deny that the notion of mediality has wider implications (within scientific and humanities disciplines), simply that it must also find its place within the theoretical field of art.

Conclusion

At this point it may be possible to suggest (yet another) brief summary description of media art:

The field of media art represents a creative and reflective engagement with the contemporary scene and long heritage of technologically enabled experience, representation and communication. Very importantly, media art positions itself within the space of contemporary art. It may test the limits of art and open up a dialogue to technical and scientific disciplines, but it is fundamentally conceived in relation to traditions of avant-garde, conceptual and participatory art. The notion of media is understood broadly, taking shape variously as a technical, cultural, aesthetic and philosophical phenomenon.

Although at one level this may seem to indicate the need for a mega discipline, the other possibility is that media art may actually have its greatest success by abandoning the hubris of autonomy - by effectively disappearing. In my view, media art is better regarded less as a new discipline or specialization than as a trajectory, a pathway, an opening within the complex and multi-layered tissue of contemporary art.

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