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# A Crisis of Presentation

By Sarah Cooke

Sarah Cook looks at the current state of new media art curation in the UK and beyond

As one of the editors of CRUMB1 part of my job is to discuss the practicalities of staging media art exhibitions, from their technical requirements to their theoretical underpinnings. Three questions often float to the surface:

- 1) Why is there is no significant and dedicated space for new media art in London?
- 2) Don't you think we really need a historical exhibition of new media art (not Cybernetic Serendipity Version 2.0, but something else)? Because a) institutional curators don't know enough about where new media art has come from and hence don't understand it or b) it's been 10 years since we all got online and now everyone (Arts Council England, The Banff Centre's New Media Institute, ARS Electronica, even the International Festival of Computer Arts in Maribor) is putting out their anniversary book, and there are other and longer histories that need telling.
- 3) There is so much exciting new media art activity going on, why don't the institutional art organisations or museums / funding systems / mass media / art journalism / insert your field of interest here / pay more attention or get it? (Or, in more embittered terms, why does one festival get so much money to show their mostly commercial work while other more exiting new media projects get ignored?)

Without painting too broad a brushstroke these all seem like the wrong question, even when they come not just from artists but also from curators and funders inside the art system. They are valid questions (and they even have half-answers 1: I don't know, maybe because of 2a; 2: Maybe but that's going to be hard without dealing with 1 first; 3: Perhaps because we don't have 2b sorted yet), but they seem wrong for several reasons. Firstly, it's not productive to be negative about how new media art is being supported, exhibited, funded, and critiqued (as my colleague Beryl Graham says, accentuate the positive, remind people that there are some great works of art out there!). Secondly, the questions focus on the continued perceived need for a specific separate space for the presentation of new media art, and is that really what we want or what the field needs?

In August 2004, CRUMB shared a panel at ISEA with Steve Dietz whose paper2 eloquently presented one possible way in which curators might move beyond these three questions (in a global, not UK-specific context). He reiterated what is often noted on the CRUMB mailing list, that 'computational, interactive, networked media, present specific challenges for the curator and presenting organisation', but that we recognise 'curating new media art is just like any other curating only different. Or ... curating new media art has led to a richer understanding of curating other contemporary art.' Dietz, perhaps more than any other curator, is aware of the problems of curating media art when one considers its lack of spaces, historiography, or attention paid by the mainstream art world. Nevertheless, he called for us to adopt a position of confidence in light of new media art's success and concluded with the statement that new media has 'won' and that it would be inappropriate, not to mention lazy, to consider any work of contemporary art without taking new media into account. We should see ourselves as working in the field of 'art after new media', he said.

Dietz was not suggesting that new media specific exhibitions be abandoned (after all, he is directing the next ISEA in San Jose), any more than he was advocating that a renewed sense of cheerfulness would get around the crisis of presentation facing new media art (though, obviously, as Graham points out, it helps!). Rather, he was calling for more serious attention to be paid to the work. But herein lies the paradox: how do you remain specific about the medium as well as make a conscious effort to move out of the ghetto?

Which brings us back to the questions. As Josephine Berry Slater qualifies in her commissioning email for this text:

It's arguable that the need for [dedicated new media] spaces is undermined by the fact that now the equipment needed for showing new media work is widely available... that a lot happens online in a chaotic, emergent way... [that] the whole networked, multiple, mutant, generative aspect of the genre is totally focused on obliterating centralist, hierarchical structures of representation in the first place.

This is all true. Another argument is that as much as some curators champion the media arts, there simply isn't a public for it. Without contextualisation and connection to a known art experience it's asking a lot for a general public to step into a darkened room – so say some of the curators on the CRUMB list. Add that to the fact that it can't be sustained economically on the operating budgets available to mainstream city or regional art galleries around the UK and there you have the beginnings of an answer to the question of why there isn't a space for showing new media art.

And London? New media art production is flourishing in the regions, in part because of economies of scale, but its presentation is still limited and functions on an ad hoc basis, through festivals, one-off events, and in educationally supported environments. The brightest blip on the radar is FACT, an exciting place that has been well branded to exhibit media, most notably screen-based work. Up and comers Peterborough Digital Arts are doing a fine job of trying to expand notions of new media art from the cinematic to the networked. But frankly, I fear equally for the future of the media-specific venues such as FACT, PDA and Stills (witness the demise of the photo-based organisations across the UK in the early 1990s), as I do for the more mainstream visual-arts based organisations (Site Gallery, Spacex, the Reg Vardy Gallery or Cornerhouse, to name a handful), many of which have attempted to incorporate digital art into their contemporary art programmes but still have a hard time getting their share of market attention. It seems that audiences and funders prefer it to be kept separate, out of the galleries and in the auditorium, or as its own special time-based programme.

I worry that we wouldn't get anywhere by having a UK exhibition equivalent of BitStreams or 010101 five years too late. It's a fine line between scholarly and considered attention to medium and outright ghetto-creating formalism that might further alienate the public we need to sustain our programming. Witness Margot Lovejoy's revised book *Digital Currents*<sup>3</sup> – the more she questions the specifics of the medium of new media art, the more she questions what art is at all. This isn't necessarily going to get any easier (although talking about new media art taxonomies, identifying its historical precedents, and contextualising it within other forms of art practice will help). No, we don't need another new media specific art exhibition. We need exhibitions that engage with the themes and (to use Lev Manovich's term) symbolic forms of contemporary times (maybe we need something like MoMA's 1970 show *Information*). Some of the works in these imagined exhibitions could come from an untold history of media art, some from its untold future.

Sadly, I think new media remains marginalised within the wider visual arts context because we have trouble branding ourselves and marketing our programming to the wider public. This is as much to do with the audiences familiarity (or lack of) with technology – it being mistaken for a tool of interpretation, for instance – as it is to do with our own curatorial quandaries in demarcating the field of practice of new media art and contextualising it. Too often we tailor our projects to the size of the boxes dreamed up by funders. Whether we are presenting new media work within mixed media organisations or media-specific galleries themselves, the argument of how the work 'fits' the programme is the one that most often ends in a stalemate. We need to find ways through this, perhaps by acknowledging we work in the diverse field of 'art after new media', and perhaps simply by being more serious about the work and what it is trying to say, on the level of both form and content. Stop asking why there is nowhere to show it and instead work on what it needs to get seen and appreciated.

## FOOTNOTES

1 CRUMB is an online organisation that facilitates professional development for curators engaged in new media art , see <http://www.crumbweb.org>

2 Steve Dietz 'Art After New Media' (presentation at ISEA 2004) online at <http://www.yproductions.com>

3 Margot Lovejoy, *Digital Currents: Art in the Electronic Age*, London: Routledge, 2004.

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