

Table of Contents

Art(s Council) History 1

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By Olga Goriunova

The Arts Council are making history – in their own image. Olga Goriunova reviews *New Media Art: Practice and Context in the UK 1994-2004*

New Media Art: Practice and Context in the UK 1994-2004 presents a number of projects supported by the Arts Council England from 1996 to 2004. It is also a related collection of new and reprinted essays, case studies, and discussions brought together to help the reader build a contextual understanding of the UK's new media art scene of the past decade. Texts are divided into three major parts: 'history' (new media art's deep historical roots), 'context' and 'practice'; with 'context' subdivided into 'visual arts and the expanded field' (art context and different models of development), 'arts infrastructure' (infrastructures seen from a recent historical perspective), 'technology, use and play' (internet and the gaming boom, promises and fallacies), and 'artistic freedom, legal protection' (questions of open source, free software, licensing, and authorship). Projects are presented according to a certain format following the essays that either directly refer to them or describe the phenomena they address.

The publication is not meant to function as an anthology or seminal reading, it is rather an attempt to present an imprint of a certain epoch at a certain geographical location, documentation that will comprise the lasting portrait of an era.

The intention that brought the publication to life might be the following: an art institution should report on the way it has spent its budget, and the attempt to do it in a smarter way than art institutions usually do is praiseworthy. It is not a glossy catalogue listing funded projects and making you feel sorry for the trees. It is a publication that brings together project descriptions (some of which indeed became very influential and well known first; world-wide), essays analysing them, email communications, presentations, and more historical or theoretical endeavours establishing connections to previous art movements or economic, social and political factors influencing the development of media art in the UK. So, it is a smart and interesting step. But here exactly is the trap.

The context is wider and includes much more than only the projects supported by the Arts Council. But only these projects could be presented (some others do get a mention in the essays, some are still left out). So the Arts Council or, better, the imaginary network of the book's makers needs to focus on its own activity, but wants to include others people's activity. Similarly, the narration always has to return to the Arts Council's role, which means that the book's narrative circle, whilst straining to expand, is always confined within certain limits, always stretching to reveal the richness and follies of the decade but never hitting its target. The tension is not resolved. In the end, it seems the imaginary network wanted to present its own work, but tried hard to present the whole scene that surrounded it as one oriented to itself. This is not true but rather a surface effect of the contradictions of the shrinking and expanding circle.

It is not the art institutions that develop arts and culture; they can contribute to, serve or influence it in many ways, but they are definitely not the engines of the process. Quite often this view is not shared by art institutions themselves. The main disadvantage of the book is that its historicising efforts are based on these premises; the disadvantage is intensified by the fact that the title does not contain a reference to the Arts Council, but refers to the context the publication fails to build neutrally.

However, this all being said, the book is still worth reading. It remains an interesting publication presenting some context and practice, a resource of information for an outsider and probably a source of arguments for insiders.

In addition, it could be quite effectively used by researchers focusing on the sociology of art or questions of art, money, and power: one could analyse the lists of artists' names and identify the ones that appear occasionally and those that appear regularly each year (some who have never been heard of and others who are very well known, with good and bad reputations), analyse sums of money and various correlations between years, names, amounts, groups, topics, genres, etc. One could also research the questions of locality and globality, focusing on the choice of factors that build the context – some of which made an impact or triggered certain new media art movements in many countries, while there are clearly other unmentioned factors that were not relevant or were not so influential for the UK scene, like the collapse of the USSR and discourses around Eastern Europe. The list of things made visible by such a publication could be continued.

New Media Art: Practice and Context in the UK 1994-2004, Lucy Kimbell ed., Arts Council England in association with Cornerhouse Publications, 2004 £14.99

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