

Notes for PAPER given by Mike Leggett at  
Perth Institute for the Contemporary Arts Saturday 15th February 1997  
with Jon Mundine; Catherine de Zegher; John Barratt-Leonard; David Bromfield  
(Chair)

**Electronic Space & Public Space: Museums, Galleries and Digital Media:**  
(making less mainstream practices visible; exploring points of convergence or  
dissonance in art and the public sphere, indigenous cultures; feminist art practice,  
technology in arts practice; discussing what might have been 'hidden in plain  
sight').

I'm going to develop some references that I made in the talk yesterday at the Art  
Gallery of Western Australia which explored as its central theme those issues  
raised by artists whose work appears in the Burning the Interface exhibition. The  
theme concerned notions of interface and immersion within interactive  
multimedia; and the question of motivation was raised - why should I want to  
interact?

This is a question I think those of us who visit galleries regularly have often  
forgotten is at odds with the 'real' world where experience is mediated by  
governments, corporations and professionals propagating viewpoints which  
provide answers to the existential continuum - sorry, party. For many who  
encounter art casually, visitors to museums and galleries, reflection is often  
assumed to be the response of the art viewer, reposing before the 'mirror of the  
soul'. Confronted with much of the art produced during this century, however, the  
response required has more often been the reflexive - what the historian and  
commentator Simon Schama has observed as being: "...the increasingly precious  
and reflexive variations on the venerable modernist theme of the uncoupling of  
painterly process and its ostensible objects, the endless pirouettes around the holy  
of holies: representation theory". [1]

Work in the area of electronic media, it could be suggested that a succession of  
reflexes now is described as interaction. Without wishing to get into a debate at  
this stage about these philosophical issues, when it comes to showing work to a  
public in a museum rather than to a clientel visiting a gallery Much recent  
multimedia work by artists explores this potential, essentially by navigating  
through the various 'screen spaces' that make up the virtual whole.

The presentation today will deal more particularly with issues like the 'virtual' and  
what I will resist calling the 'real' and instead call the non-virtual! In normal  
language I will stick with Electronic Space and Public Space, the public space of  
Museums, Galleries and I chaired a session at the last International Symposium of  
Electronci Art held in Rotterdam during September which discussed some of  
these issues. The theme for the symposium was 'virtual' communities but our  
session concentrated on 'real' or public spaces in which, to quote Professor Roy  
Ascott, ours is "an art which is emergent from a multiplicity of interactions in  
electronic spaces." Now there is a certain irony in quoting Roy in the context of  
this Panel because in the 20 years I've admired his work he has of course been the  
champion, and has almost defined "telematic culture", or art on the wire - Homo  
Telematicus and the connectivist manifesto.

A multiplicity of interactions in electronic space can of course be encountered in the three dimensional space of a public gallery as well as the private space of "computus domesticus". Indeed the actual presence of people along with the virtual presence of those on-line could constitute a chance for divergent forms from within the emergence that Roy proposes.

The Panel session went on to focus on the institutional forms that need to be developed in order that the widest possible multiplicity of interactions can occur in electronic space in the most public way, for others to experience, in particular tax-payers and sponsors. We discussed the practice of gallery and museum spaces providing access to, and information about art, and extending their function to a dynamic educational role that would ameliorate, or reduce, the tendency which divides the information rich from the experiential poor. To accelerate the movement away from an attitude revealed in this quote from a young fogey Sydney-based arts commentator who opinionated: "Peering at a monitor is an impoverished aesthetic experience."

Organisations concerned with exhibition practice will need to:

- mediate between the artist and the consumer to engage with these issues politically ;
- address the logistical problems associated with the exhibition of 'the artwork of the electronic spaces';
- and anticipate the other issues that will emerge because of the complexity of negotiations involving so many people and interests - this is not just a matter of dumping a few files on a Web server!

I draw your attention to the related Panel session on Friday morning, Between Exhibition & Network. In the abstract for that session reference is made to: "Long standing relationships between the artists and their audience, the curatorial process, and entrenched cultural institutions, neither apply to, nor nurture the development of contemporary art-making as it increasingly occurs in this radically reconfigured terrain." The session this morning will avoid this kind of conjecture and focus on some experience and evidence about what some of the exhibitional institutions are doing in an effort to reflect contemporary art practice. I should add that my background is as an artist working with film, video and photography, and now interactive multimedia. Part of my practice has always been in exhibition and curation - I was a founding member of the London Film-makers Co-operative Workshop, the first cultural institution to integrate the production, distribution and exhibition of artists' film.

Museum of Contemporary Art CD-ROM Exhibition 1996: Mike Leggett

"I have raised the issue of the dynamic educative role of public galleries and museums because this was, fundamentally, my own motivation for researching and then developing the exhibition *Burning the Interface*<*International Artists CD-ROM*> which took place in Sydney between March and July of this year. "

Presentation about the mounting of this exhibition, with slides and videotape. Points covered: Research; Motivation; Sponsorship 1; Definition and Planning; Sponsorship 2; Design; Marketing strategies; Preparation and Installation; Media; Merchandising; Educational strategies; Market Research. New Exhibition

Practice in Australia:

Phase 2 of MCA; Exhibition and curation agencies - Experimenta in Melbourne, and SIN Sydney Intermedia Network; Co-operative Multimedia Centres - Ngapardji in Adelaide; Access Australia in Sydney; Starlit and another in Brisbane; Melbourne and Perth.

Zuntrum fur Kunst und Medien (ZKM) Museum - Jill Scott

Jill Scott is an Australian artist currently based in Germany and after working in the mediums of video and performance she began working with digital installations in the mid-80s and currently has the work Frontiers of Utopia in the exhibition that is part of V2 DEAF. She described in detail the plans for the 'hybrid' museum that is shortly to open at ZKM in Karlsruhe under the directorship of Hans Peter Schwartz using the Web site that describes the exhibit to illustrate her points.

(<http://www.zkm.de/departments/medienmuseum/main.en.html>)

ASTN and CHAOS: Annick Bureauad

Annick Bureauad is the President of Art Science Technology Network Inc (ASTN) which publishes FineArt Forum. She is the editor of the International Directory of Electronic Arts (IDEA) published by CHAOS. She spoke in relation to a consultancy she has recently completed for the French Ministry of Culture about the future for museums and their object-based structures, their architecture, the intellectual patterns of the staff. She raised the issue of 'cultural worth' in relation to the space available for creation, the narrativisation effect of art historical traditions. The novelty of technology in some contexts, for instance science museums, avoided content problems associated with time-based media. Artists' fees and commissions in this area needed urgent attention. Curatorial practices of themes and surveys needed to give account to the flexibility of forms that electronic media produced, which in itself raised problems of conservation for museum culture. Flexibility was the key for the future, along the lines of theatre possibly: Ars Electronica Centre may become a model.

(<http://www-mitpress.mit.edu/Leonardo/astn/whatis.html>)

Film and Video Umbrella - Stephen Bode

This London based organisation has been operating for nearly ten years and concentrates on researching and curating exhibits by British artists working with video and digital media. The presentation covered the logistics of running such an organisation and detailed a major exhibit held last year at the Natural History Museum in London. (<http://kit.trdkunst.no/Projects/vabi.html>)

Refs

[1] pp 124 Landscape and memory: Simon Schama: pub Harper Collins 1995.