
As with most academic conferences these days, parallel sessions ensured that any one participant could only sample a portion of the papers on offer. This means that even attendance at the conference provides only a partial view. I’ll try and explicate that view here.
What one gets from being lucky enough to be present (even partially so) is a sense of the state of play in the field of media art histories. Perhaps having just come, like many others at Rewire, from ISEA in Istanbul I’ll admit to feeling fairly attuned to a feeling of anxiety about what the future of the past of media art might be. In a recent article for this magazine (RT104, p36), I noted that one gets a sense that media art practices have begun to be incorporated into more mainstream contemporary arts practices. This is reflected in the subsumption of the category ‘media art’ in education and funding regimes into broader categories of art that reflect how, for example, artists are working with media technologies today. This is then echoed in a sense of urgency, which I felt exhibited itself at Rewire, in relation to how media art maintains an identity as a specific and historical set of practices and outcomes that need to be preserved.

The whole conference series is itself set up for precisely this purpose. This year’s conference took this one step further by formulating and attempting to endorse an international declaration on the need to establish global, networked structures to preserve the recent past of media art history before it is too late. The declaration points out that, “As a result of rapid changes in technology, many major works made even 10 years ago can no longer be shown or are disappearing without a trace. If this situation is not addressed, we face losing an art form that is a central part of our post-industrial digital culture. To date, systematic global preservation and documentation campaigns do not exist.”

It goes on to list a key set of goals that such a campaign might aim to achieve including; recognising and building upon existing knowledge and resources; providing and fostering channels of communication; enabling the international research community to create/upload/access data to be shared; encouraging peer exchange and addressing the new challenges of Media Art; developing scientific technologies for documentation and preservation of Media Art; providing inspiration and resources for curators, artists, scholars, educators and audiences; supporting the Media Art History network, its conference series, text repositories and scientific publications; and promotion of new ways of understanding media art, science, technology and its histories. The declaration has since been posted online and has been endorsed by a long and distinguished list of signatories (www.mediaarthistory.org).

The necessity of ensuring that media art history is preserved and the challenges that this preservation presents to us was also articulated through our exposure, as conference delegates, to some extraordinary media art works. Rewire was chaired by Mike Stubbs, former senior curator at ACMI in Melbourne and now CEO of FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) based in Liverpool. Consequently, the conference coincided (and collaboratively hosted activities) with this year’s Abandon Normal Devices (AND) event, a regional festival of new cinema and digital culture held in and around Liverpool.

The festival included works such as Kurt Hentschläger’s extraordinary ZEE. Described by Claudia Hart as “the world as viewed by a dying robot clone from the inside of a Turner landscape painting,” ZEE is an installation made from fog, light and sound. Installed in a small, enclosed space, the viewer is immersed in the work for a period of
12 minutes during which time the artist claims to be trying to induce in them a particular kind of sensory overload. After lining up to enter the work and signing a detailed (and slightly scary) medical indemnity form, the viewer is led, along with about eight others, into a room where they are left to experience the work. Upon exiting, many viewers were then approached to articulate the experience to a waiting camera crew. ZEE exemplifies the problems articulated above. How does one ‘preserve’ such a work given that the ‘work’ is a product of audience affect as much as it is a thing in itself? Clearly, Hentschläger is mindful of this as the immediate documentation of the ‘affect effect’ in the form of witness statements testifies.

UK telematics artist Paul Sermon spoke to this very point at Rewire stating that because of the transitory nature of his art he is much more interested in preserving the audience’s response than worrying about the tricky task of making his work last. Finding an adequate way for this to happen, one that also preserves the feeling of experiencing his art, is a real concern for him. For Sermon, the curatorial imperative of making the work reproducible (and hence archivable) is not his first priority.

The conference is itself one mode of preservation of a certain historical trajectory in media art practice. That there was a need to articulate this further in an international declaration which reiterated the need to establish global, networked structures to preserve the recent past of media art history suggests that the conference itself is not sufficient to achieve this aim. I think this is certainly true. The difficulty with conferences in general at present is that there is so much emphasis on academic credentialism—so much so that most Australian academics struggle these days to attend events that are not tied to DEEWR [Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations] outcomes—that a genuine conference where one is encouraged, in the true sense of the word, to compare, consult, deliberate and talk over is a rare event indeed. Parallel sessions with papers grouped under conspicuously vague headings such as Philosophies (of what, one might ask) means that attendees, when not rushing from room to room, are left puzzled as to what connections can be made between say a paper titled “Disintegration, Translation, Temporality” and another titled “Polar roses, code and crochet lace: Media non-specificity in craft-based textile forms.” This is not, I should stress, the fault of either the organisers or the presenters.

I would go so far as to argue that it is endemic of academic conferences in general. For that reason, most of the real conferring happens over a beer at dinner or afternoon tea. In the case of Rewire, joint events with the cinema and digital culture festival Abandon Normal Devices allowed delegates a chance to experience events and activities together that the conference format itself made more not less difficult. Perhaps one part of the project to preserve media art histories needs to focus on just this question. How can the precious times when those whose knowledge and memories of media art come together be most effectively used as a time for genuine discussion, debate and decision-making and how can that be preserved? I can’t claim to have the answer to that question but I certainly think it is one that is worth considering.
Rewire: Fourth International Conference on the Histories of Media Art, Science and Technology, host FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology), Sept 28-Oct 1; Abandon Normal Devices (AND) video and arts festival presented in partnership with FACT, Cornerhouse (Manchester) and folly (Lancaster), FACT, Liverpool, UK, Sept 29-Oct 2

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