AUSTRALIAN MEDIA ARTISTS HAVE A STRONG REPUTATION AS BEING AMONGST THE MOST ACTIVE, CREATIVE AND INNOVATIVE IN THE WORLD. THESE ARTISTS AND THE INFRASTRUCTURES THAT SUPPORT THEM HAVE CREATED A STRONG COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE THAT HAS INFLUENCED BOTH ART MAKING AND ART INSTITUTIONS HERE AND INTERNATIONALLY. LOCATING THE EXACT TIME AND PLACE WHEN THIS BEGAN IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE. HOWEVER, IT IS CLEAR THAT SINCE THE EARLY 1990s, THE DIGITAL TURN HERALDED BY THE EMERGENCE OF THE PERSONAL COMPUTER AND THE INTERNET HAS LED TO AN EXPLOSION OF DIVERSITY IN ART PRACTICES. THESE PRACTICES HAVE NOT ONLY CREATED A BREADTH AND DEPTH OF MEDIA ART BUT ALONG THE WAY HAVE TRANSFORMED MANY MORE TRADITIONAL ARTISTIC FORMS FROM DANCE TO PAINTING TO SCULPTURE.

While funding for media arts in Australia has been multifaceted if somewhat erratic, it is education that has played a pivotal role in developing and supporting media arts practice. As Elaine Lally noted in the Australia Council New Media Arts Scoping Study Discussion Paper (2006), “Higher educational institutions have supported the sector strongly since the early 90s, in terms of training but especially [with] access to infrastructure...Many artists first got access to equipment and studios through study and subsequently find work or fellowships as academics and this is at least partly because it gives them access to the infrastructure they need to make work” (Lally, E., New media art scoping study discussion paper, Australia Council for the Arts, July, 2006).

In fact, media arts education goes back even further than this. The School of Art and Design at Phillip Institute of Technology (now RMIT) was offering courses in media arts as far back as the late 1970s. Leading media artists such as Philip Brophy, Philip Samartzis, Martine Corompt and Ian Haig can all trace their practice back to this outer suburban island of arts culture in Melbourne’s northern suburbs. The fact that this now appears to be a little known or remembered fact is testament to the lack of information available about the evolution of media arts education in Australia. There are undoubtedly many other instances of courses taken and taught of which this author is unaware (all feedback welcomed). But the point here is that the evolution of media arts education and its current profile in higher education institutions in Australia is poorly documented and, as a consequence, not well understood by those either within the field itself or in the broader community.

None of this would matter much if such art practices were given the respect and attention they deserve within the very higher education institutions that purport to
attention they deserve within the very higher education institutions that purport to support them. However, with a few notable exceptions, such as SymbioticA (at UWA) and iCinema (at UNSW/COFA), to name just two, this is rarely the case. As universities move towards what Marilyn Strathern has most aptly described as an “audit culture” —where “higher education is being moulded and managed according to what seems to be an almost ubiquitous consensus of aims, objectives and procedures” which seek to endorse “government through the twin passage points of economic efficiency and good practice” (Marilyn Strathern, Audit cultures: anthropological studies in accountability, ethics, and the academy, Routledge, London, 2000), the necessity of providing those who control the higher education budget with clear and compelling evidence of the vibrancy of the field is vital.

With this in mind, the group behind the Media Arts Scoping Study Symposium (MASS) and the National Organisation of Media Arts Database (NOMAD), led by Paul Thomas at Curtin University, applied for and received funding from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (formerly the Carrick Institute). The group include Eleanor Gates-Stuart (formerly head of Centre for New Media Arts, ANU; currently Fellow at ANU), Vince Dziekan (Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University), Associate Professor Brogan Bunt (Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong), Professor Julian Knowles (QUT Creative Industries Faculty), Lyndal Jones (Creative Media, RMIT), Ross Harley (CoFA, UNSW), Mitchell Whitelaw (School of Creative Communication, University of Canberra) and artists, theorist and electronic engineer Stephen Jones. They have secured the support of each of the institutions already mentioned as well as ANAT and the ANAT supported Synapse project, the Australian Screen Production Education & Research Association (ASPERA), Melbourne University and the Victorian College of the Arts. It is hoped that more institutions will get on board to support the project as it gains momentum.

The aim of both MASS and NOMAD is to encourage the creative exchange of ideas, information, curricular models and best practice solutions in the field of media arts education. The MASS symposium will be held in Melbourne at the Victorian College of the Arts on July 4 with the explicit aims of both exploring theoretical, scientific and philosophical pedagogies that have influenced the development of media arts and establishing the basis for a functional network model for the establishment and growth of NOMAD. The organisers hope to attract anyone who is interested in the introduction and infiltration of digital media, technologies and related pedagogies in disciplines such as Art & Design, Architecture, the Humanities and Arts & Social Sciences; as well as to showcase examples of interdisciplinarity through art-science-technology collaborations. The respected artist (and co-editor of White Heat Cold Logic: British Computer Art 1960-1980, MIT, 2009), Paul Brown, will deliver the keynote address.

While it is hoped that the symposium will provide a chance for media arts educators and practitioners from around Australia to have some much needed face to face discussion and debate, there’s no doubt that it is also designed to provide some impetus for the development of NOMAD. The National Organisation of Media Arts Database is integral to the success of the overall MASS/NOMAD venture as it constitutes the longitudinal outcome of the entire project. It is currently located at http://www.nomad.net.au.

NOMAD is not the first attempt to create a national database of new media and media arts education. The Fibreculture network began trying to compile a list of subjects and
The Fibreculture network began trying to compile a list of subjects and courses relating to these fields back in 2003. However, NOMAD is the first to do so with a reasonable amount of short term funding. That said, similar issues faced by Fibreculture may plague the project if attention is not paid to the inherent difficulties that beset such missions. (And missions they most certainly are as they require a degree of zeal to really make them work.)

The database is set up to work as a kind of social network in the sense that members are able to share information about who they are, by creating a profile, and what they do, by uploading materials they wish to share with others to the site. However, like all social networks, it will requires a critical mass (no pun intended) to make it work. At present there are 27 registered members and that includes the working group who have established the site. With a view to building the numbers, Paul Thomas has been working hard to visit institutions and individuals to explain the project and to encourage them to participate. Part of the difficulty is getting them to understand the critical nature of the project in terms of the need to create a stronger sense of identity for media arts education within higher education institutions and funding bodies. While the initial outlay of time required to join and contribute may seem initially onerous to those of us who already feel overworked and undervalued, the long term rewards of having an easily accessible, well documented, identifiable and legitimised network of resources and people at our disposal, from which we can draw and towards which we can point our institutional auditors will be invaluable.

Close attention also needs to be paid to the penchant of media arts practitioners and educators to get bogged down in nomenclature. Clearly, debates about what constitutes media arts, electronic arts, new media arts, intermedia, interarts or any of the other descriptors applied to the field are vital. But they are debates that most of those whose approbation we need to gain, in order to continue to do what we do, either fail to understand or prefer not to hear. Surely it’s possible to preserve the diversity of practices and programs within a community whose approaches may vary wildly but whose ultimate interest in survival unites it? NOMAD will no doubt go some way to answering that question, one way or another.

The MASS symposium will be held in Melbourne at the Victorian College of the Arts, July 4; http://mass.nomad.net.au

A digest of RealTime’s annual surveys of media arts education can be found here.

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