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'Media Art and Its Critics in the Australian Context'
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One of the repeated refrains in Australian art history is the problem of being
on the periphery in relation to the centres of the art world.[1] Yet perhaps borne
of the very same geographical isolation (especially from Europe and the
United States), Australians are great travellers and quick to take up new
technologies. To be sure, Australian artists have long been recognised
participants in the international circuit of media art festivals and associated
networks of critical exchange, online and off. Nevertheless, indeed perhaps
because of its international character, media art remains an entirely marginal
presence within Australian art history. In fact, it almost seems to be actively
avoided. Thus – to take just one example – in Charles Green's *Peripheral
Vision: Contemporary Australian Art 1970–1994*, Stelarc is cited as "one of
very few Australian artists to achieve a considerable international
reputation".[2] While this is as true now as it was in 1995 when the book was
published, Green only mentions Stelarc's suspension performances as
opposed to his internationally acclaimed Third Hand projects. Meanwhile,
video is only included in Green's account insofar as it relates to performance.[3]
To be fair, Green's book was written before the rise of 'new media art' in the
mid-to-late 1990s. However, such an exclusion is in fact typical of more recent
histories of Australian art as well.

Australian media artists have tended to willingly assume the role of an
underappreciated avant-garde. However, with some notable exceptions, to the
extent that they have been written about the overall response by Australian
critics to media artists has been positive.[4] Are there any discernible patterns to
these responses? What kind of media art has been praised, and why? As media
art has gradually entered the mainstream, has it altered critical frameworks,
critical sensibilities, in the process? These are difficult questions, and form

part of a much larger research project on the impact of media art on art criticism. In this paper I can only introduce some of my initial findings. I want to do this via a discussion of three key events in Australian media art's history that focus around the place of *video* art in the relationship between media art and the mainstream art world.[5] My decision to limit the current discussion to video will hopefully become clear in the course of the paper.

The development of video art in Australia follows a circuitous route, and the history of its early days is still largely unwritten. By 1980, when Bernice Murphy and Stephen Jones gathered together a round-up of Australian video work for an exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, it covered the spectrum "from socially and politically oriented tapes to documentation of performance art and related activities, and to the more electronically preoccupied area of image-processing and synthesising."[6] From its inception in the 1970s, video was inspired by various motivations. What is clear is that the 1980s were a time of consolidation for video art in Australia. Thus in 1981, Murphy curated a number of video works into the first Australian *Perspecta* exhibition, where video stood alongside sculpture and painting in a major Australian gallery for the first time.

With seed funding from the Australian Film Commission, the first of several Australian Video Festivals was held in 1986, with Jill Scott as President. This came on the back of an increasing enthusiasm for exhibiting video art.[7] Ultimately called the Australian International Video Festival, the Festival had a strong international focus (with American and Japanese artists especially favoured), and significant guests, including Whitney curator John G. Hanhardt. Looking back at the catalogues the sense of an energy and optimism is palpable, as is the effort made to bridge the gap between the film, commercial and art worlds. Video art might be said to have enjoyed several lives in Australia, but in the 1986 Festival an emphasis on formal experimentation clearly embraced the hybrid role that the video interface was starting to play in the convergence between the video and the computer. In retrospect, we can already see the resulting split between artists for whom the

video was simply another medium, and those for whom it was an emerging technology.
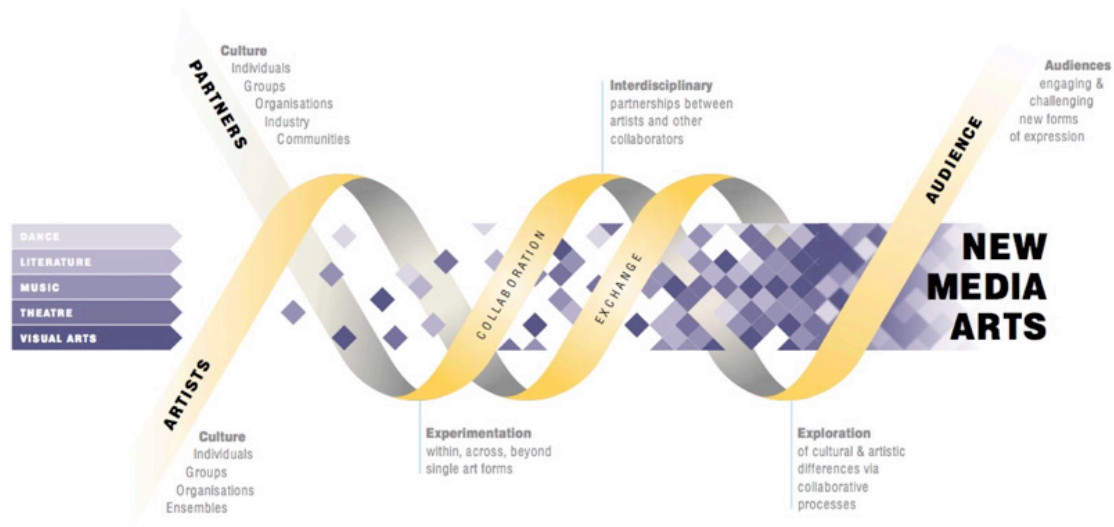

|Figure 1| Peter Callas, *Our Potential Allies*, 1980, dual monitor video installation

In the 1980s Peter Callas embodied the latter 'new media' trend, which at that time was particularly associated with video synthesis.[8] Callas developed an almost obsessive emphasis on the potential of video for the playful and allegorical refiguring of pre-existing media imagery – an approach that may be seen as part of a broader set of 'postmodern' devices such as of pastiche and the language of deconstruction.[9] Fascinated by "the disruptive energy of montage", Callas claimed that: "Australians born since the mid-fifties might well be far more 'at home' in the media landscape than they are in the real Australian landscape."[10] He also wrote, in 1983, that "Video appears to be the least 'Australian' of all contemporary art forms".[11] He was probably thinking of Australia's ongoing penchant for landscape painting as much as what he dubbed the "pressure to internationalise video art", which he attributed to "the long lasting effect of the early prophets of video art such as Nam June Paik and Marshall McLuhan. Nevertheless, despite the flurry of video activity in Australia in the late 1980s, by 1993 Callas argued that "video art has become an anachronism".[12] Indeed, many erstwhile video artists had now become video *and* computer artists, or more broadly 'media artists'.[13]

Sydney's hosting of the Third International Symposium on Electronic Art (TISEA) in 1992 was a crucial moment in video's hybrid mixing with electronic arts. Presented by the Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts and

organised locally by the Australian Network for Art and Technology, Darren Tofts, calls it "a singular, defining event in the history of media arts in Australia" in his survey history of Australian media art. Moreover he notes its fundamental importance "in bringing the electronic arts community to Australia".[14] TISEA effectively initiated the new media arts 'movement' in Australia. But as John Conomos observed at the time, the mixed or indifferent critical reception of TISEA also highlighted "the aesthetic-technological differences characterising video as a fine arts practice in contrast to video as a media discourse".[15]

TISEA occurred at a time in Australia when the Federal Government, under Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating, was developing its Creative Nation policy. This was a cultural policy linking support for the arts to future economic prosperity. The Australia Council, the nation's principal art's funding body, began to emphasise the role of technology. An advertisement for the Visuals Arts/Craft Board in 1994 states that "the Board gives priority consideration to applications that present an interest in utilising contemporary technology."[16] After an interim Hybrid Arts Board, the Australia Council eventually created a New Media Arts Fund (formalised in 1998), putting such practice on a level with dance, music, theatre and visual arts.[17] But a contorted diagram produced for a guide to new media arts funding in 2000 (Figure 2) shows a fundamental disavowal of its relationship to technology, presumably perceived as too restrictive in focus. Nevertheless, for a time, until the Fund's eventual and controversial dissolution into the Visual Arts Board in 2004, media arts in Australia were quite lavishly funded – even, I would argue, to the point of generating a degree of jealousy and cynicism among contemporary artists more broadly.

|Figure 2| Diagram from *Evolve: A Guide to New Media Arts Fund Support* (Australia Council, 2000)

On the audience front, 1994 was an important year in Australian media art: the free arts newspaper *Real Time* was established (by Keith Gallasch and Virginia Baxter), linking performance and electronic media, and the essay collection *Electronic Arts in Australia*, edited by Nicholas Zurbrugg, underscored the vitality of the scene. It was the moment of the CD-ROM, peaking all too quickly with Mike Leggett's exhibition *Burning the Interface <International artists' CD-ROM>* for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney at the MCA, 1996. Australia's CD-ROM culture was largely financed by the Australian Film Commission, but the results were patchy. The era of 'cyberculture' and the 'posthuman' followed, and certain work, such as the digital photography and video of Patricia Piccinni successfully garnered a broader public's attention. Soon, by the end of the millennium, enthusiasm was giving way to the consolidation of media art installation practices in museums and galleries, and, increasingly, to online and networked art practice. Meanwhile, video was coming to dominate mainstream Australian contemporary practice – particularly as digital video cameras came down in price and editing software became widespread – while a lack of infrastructure meant art spaces were poorly equipped with the technology to show digital media art.

New media art gained a strong physical presence with the opening of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in central Melbourne's Federation Square in 2002. The nation's first museum "devoted to the moving image in all its forms", modeled on international counterparts such as ZKM in Karlsruhe and FACT in Liverpool, its Screen Gallery was widely seen as "a coming-of-age for new media art in Australia".[18] But ACMI also cast in concrete a split between media art and contemporary art: it was located right next door to the newly relocated and renovated National Gallery of Victoria, which found itself relieved of the pressure to properly represent and collect artists working with video. Meanwhile, for institutional reasons, ACMI privileged media art's relationship to cinema, distancing its links to visual art movements such as Dada and conceptual art. ACMI's inaugural creative director, Ross Gibson (who was also the first Fellow in New Media at the Australia Council in 1997), promoted the tunnel-shaped Screen Gallery as a darkened space, unlike the bright white rooms designed for viewing paintings and sculpture. But in doing so, the moving image became elevated over the materiality of media and its physical installation. While this approach appeared seamless, it also had the unintended consequence of flattening the visual experience and a sense of the historicity of various media forms. ACMI hoped to bring new media art to the mainstream.[19] It has proved an uphill battle, with limited program budgets and pressure to win public support.

The first exhibition at ACMI was the international exhibition 'Deep Space: Sensation and Immersion' in 2002 (originally developed as 'Space Odysseys: Sensation and Immersion' at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2001). *The Australian* newspaper critic Benjamin Genocchio started his review of the Sydney exhibition by celebrating the potential of new media art:

> I have little patience with those who complain about the proliferation of multimedia art, those who moan that beauty is dead or that skills are being degraded and lost in a miasma of juvenile gimmickry. Such people are ill-informed, it seems to me, for the breadth of creativity clustered under the banner of new media art these days is invigorating

if not inspirational, even if the quality – as with any art form – remains patchy. New media art is about risk, not conformity[20]

Aside from its enthusiasm, the particularly noteworthy aspects of this review is the emphasis on aesthetics:

> Playing with sound, space, perception and light, all eight works invite viewers not just to immerse themselves in a sensuous space but also interact with the surroundings and thereby undergo a deeper, mind-altering experience. Each work consequently demands lengthy, silent contemplation."

Notably, the exhibition was presented in terms of immersive spatial experiences, rather than as a computer or video art show (even though data projectors were utilised by no less than six of the exhibition's eight large-scale installations).[21] While this might be taken as a victory for art over technology, it might also be taken as symptomatic of the emphasis on surface play and spectacle that has taken up the space of critical media discourse.[22] This is striking in various audience-focused biennial exhibitions held by Melbourne-based Experimenta, such as *Vanishing Point* (2005) and *Experimenta Playground* (2007), which include a wide range of Australian and international media art with relatively little concern for political content or critical reflection on the technology utilised. Video occupies a central place in these exhibitions, but less at the level of a technology than in terms of post-cinematic experimentation.

Even from this very truncated account, we can see how video art has been central to enabling the development of media art in Australia. Video can be seen as part of a broader shift, with performance art, from the representational tradition of visual art to one engaged in the more presentational modes – incorporating the sense of the viewer participating in the space of the object, images or action. The attempted mainstreaming of media art has underlined that video's versatility lies in its flexible interface with other representational systems. But the 'museumization' of video

projection has began to demand video installation in a new way.[23] Meanwhile, video's broader position in contemporary art has come at the price of turning its back on its potential as a communications medium, and simply utilising it as a 'representational' medium. Contemporary artists such as Daniel von Sturmer and Daniel Crooks, who do explore the potential of video to explore formal questions of time and space, are now in the minority. And needless to say, the video art that is now celebrated and collected in Australia is generally not considered as part of a media art tradition.

It is worth returning to art historian and critic Charles Green, with whom I began, in a more recent piece of writing who reminds us that in the 1990s "contemporary art … became dependent upon, but definitely not interchangeable with, new media." He continues:

> New media theorists sometimes assume the centrality of new media to contemporary art. This is based upon new media's envelopment in theories of paradigm change, but this isn't shared by museums and institutions of art, who by and large relegated new media art and culture to the same peripheral spaces allocated during the 1970s to video.[24]

Ultimately, as Green insists, the central place of video within survey exhibitions of contemporary art does not "represent the triumph of the film and video department." In short, the medium is without an institutional memory, and new media art is likely to suffer the same fate as aspects of its production are absorbed into contemporary art and its history.

In this paper, then, by examining the historical reception of one aspect of media art in Australia, I have demonstrated some of the multiple and overlapping ways in which the position of video art acts has acted as a bridge between media art and mainstream contemporary art. In turn, the particular, yet 'globular' shape of this media arts 'movement' betrays the complex issue of how national art histories relate to broader national and international art contexts. While it is clear that the practice and reception of Australian media

art has been closely tied to its patterns of local funding, the international circuits of media art complicate histories written from a national perspective. Yet this should not prevent us from aspiring to more situated critical histories and historically aware critical practices. This seems particularly important given that the hazy reception of media art in Australia, which suggests a parallel crisis in art criticism as critics grapple with being immersed in participatory and sensuous aesthetics spaces. Undoubtedly we need to promote new forms of criticism that are capable of engaging with such spaces, without a reduction to mere subjectivism. There are few writers on media arts in Australia, and most of them are advocates – curators and artists with a insider's interest in the field – while the best writing tends to appear in international email lists (such as *Empyre*). Yet criticism matters, insofar as it helps to generate critical publics, histories and, in turn, more rigorously informed practice.

Acknowledgements

[1] See, most famously, Terry Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem', *Artforum* 13 (Sept. 1974), pp. 54–59.

[2] Charles Green, *Peripheral Vision: Contemporary Australian Art 1970–1994* (East Roseville: Craftsman House, 1995), p. 12.

[3] Green refers to Lyndal Jones' *Prediction Pieces* and John Gillies, and their blurring of "boundaries between installation and film". (105) An exhibition roughly inspired by the book opened the new National Gallery of Victoria in 2002, *Fieldwork: Australian Art 1968–2002*, also excluded media art from its purvey, reflecting conservative collection policies.

[4] Peter Timms, former art critic for *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne, devotes an entire chapter to what he calls 'new media' in his polemical book *What's Wrong with Contemporary Art?* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), but overrates its power in his rush to decry the market-driven basis of contemporary art.

[5] In Australia, the terms 'video art' and 'electronic arts' were more widely used in the 1980s and early 1990s than 'media art'. 'New media art', a more recent

coinage, did not become widespread until the mid-1990s. The critic Darren Tofts, a strong advocate of Australian media art, pays close attention to the term 'media art' in his survey book *Interzone: Media Arts in Australia* (Melbourne: Craftsman House, 2005). He uses the term "in recognition of a historical continuity of technological experimentation with media, old and new" (9), seeking to distance it from what he sees as the reductive terms 'digital art' and 'new media art', which he claims as too reductive for their foregrounding of the computer (8). Tofts' book is primarily about the 1990s – where, he says "Media arts have come to be regarded as the signature form of this period, the art of its time." (9) Acknowledging that all art involves a medium and could therefore be considered 'media art', he suggests that during this time the computer is the predominant mode, or 'emerging technology'.

[6] Bernice Murphy, 'Towards a History of Australian Video', in *The Australian Video Festival 1986*, catalogue (Sydney: Australian Video Festival, 1986), p. 19. The exhibition began life touring to venues such as the Kitchen in New York and Video Free America in San Francisco.

[7] Other exhibitions of video art included 'Scanlight: New Developments in Video Art', at the Australian Centre for Photography in 1985, and 'Video Now' at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne in 1985.

[8] One half of this divide is explored in Stephen Jones, 'Synthetics: A History of the Electronically Generated Image in Australia', *Leonardo*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2003, pp. 187–195.

[9] Callas was trained in film-editing at ABC studios and took his first ideas about the manipulation of imagery from working in the news department. He then studied print making at art school, an influence in the graphic use of imagery in his later videos. He was drawn to video for its malleability (increasing in the late 1970s with editing suites such as Fairlight and AVID and the instantaneous results. See *Peter Callas*: *Initialising History* (Sydney: DLux Media Arts, 1999).

[10] Peter Callas, 'Interviewed by Nicolas Zurbrugg' in *Electronic Arts in Australia*, Special issue of *Continuum* 8.1 (1994), pp. 115 & 92.

[11] Peter Callas 'Australian Video Art & Australian Identity – A Personal View', in *Continuum '83: The 1st Exhibition of Australian Contemporary Art in Japan*, Exhibition catalogue (1983).

[12] Callas, 'Interviewed by Nicolas Zurbrugg', p. 112.

[13] Arguably, the end of the road for so-called 'experimental' video art was bookmarked by Peter Callas' exhibition 'An Eccentric Orbit: Video Art in Australia 1980–1994', an international touring exhibition initiated by the American Federation of Arts (1994).

[14] Tofts, *Interzone*, p. 136.

[15] John Conomos, 'Rethinking Australian Video in the Nineties' in *Electronic Arts in Australia*, p. 132.

[16] The advertisements appears in *Electronic Arts in Australia*

[17] John Rimmer, the first chair of the fund, said it will assist artists working across disciplines and those collaborating with science and technology: "People are pushing the boundaries of the existing art forms", he said. "We are interested in looking at how new technology like computers or medical technology enable [artists] to explore different ways of saying things. Some will be successful and become incorporated in mainstream art in the future." Catherine Taylor, 'Forms can fuse and genres collide', *The Australian*, 15 May 1998.

[18] Jenny Sinclair, 'New media 'ecology' finds a home downtown', *The Age,* 29 February 2000.

[19] "The job of new media art, Gibson says, is to help people understand where they stand and who they are in relation to the computer-saturated world of the city." Sinclair, 'New media'.

[20] Benjamin Genocchio, 'Mind-altering Multimedia Mix', *The Australian*, 24 August 2001.

[21] Artists included Bruce Nauman, Gary Hill, Mariko Mori, Luc Courchesne and the Australians David Haines and Joyce Hinterding. The exhibition promised to "plunge the audience in wondrous volumes of light, sound and stimulus" (Press Release, AGNSW online) The artists "invite us on a journey into physical and electronic spaces of imagery, light and sound. Visitors will literally move through art works, interact with ghostly figures and be submerged in limitless space." – in short, a series of *immersive spatial experiences*. As ACMI's website more prosaically puts it: "The title of the exhibition 'Deep Space: Sensation & Immersion' refers to a set of spatial journeys that have been realised through media such as light, video, film and digital media. In many of the works the viewer encounters art through sight, touch, sound, voice and physical movement. The audience is invited to immerse themselves in the wonder of the spaces, to explore their physical construction, their digital presence, their filmic pulse and their saturated expanses of colour and light."

[22] This emphasis on play has been fused with en emerging interest by artists in computer gaming.

[23] See Martha Rosler, 'Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment' in *Illuminating Video*, edited by Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture Press, 1991), p. 44.

[24] Charles Green, 'Empire' in *Meridian: Focus on Contemporary Australian Art*, eds. Rachel Kent and Russell Storer (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002), p. 12.