

MESH#17: NEW MEDIA ART IN AUSTRALIA AND ASIA

Below: City view of Shibuya
Photo courtesy Fumihiko Sumitomo



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MESH#17: New Media Art in Australia and Asia attempts to create a partial and provisional map of the complex and at times fraught terrain of 'new media art' in Australia and the Asian region. The essays reproduced here are a selection from the full issue which is available online at <http://www.experimenta.org/mesh/>.

We invited six writers from six regional centres – Adelaide, Bangkok, Beijing, Delhi, Singapore and Tokyo – to provide a local snapshot giving insight into the specific contexts – social, cultural, historical and political – that drive new media art practice in their location. What emerges is, of course, a complex picture of what 'new media art' might be, showing how the same technologies can give rise to radically different practices and techniques. Complementing these six essays, brief profiles on a range of different artists and collectives from Australia and across the region explore this proliferating diversity in more detail.

Inevitably, what emerges from these essays and profiles is a series of questions around definition. New media art is a notoriously slippery and contested term, often criticised as a vague generalisation that paradoxically imposes a false unity and coherence on the phenomena that it names.¹ So too 'Asia' is another such contested term, understood as coming from outside the region rather than within, and serving to impose an illusion of unity on a diversity of societies and cultures.

'Asia' denotes a complex and contested social, political and economic landscape. It includes the world's two fastest growing economies – China and India; the world's largest democracy – India; the world's largest Islamic Nation – Indonesia; and Laos – an ethnically diverse one-party communist state that has been classified as one of the world's least developed nations. To suggest that 'Asia' denotes a unity in any but the vaguest geographical terms is an absurdity. In fact, in Britain, 'Asia' is used primarily to refer to the Indian subcontinent, while in the United States it most commonly refers to North Asia. In Australia, it is the East to our North, perceived variously as a threat and an opportunity. But as our closest neighbour, Asia is an everyday part of our lives and increasingly, a complex component of our national identity.

BROADSHEET INTRODUCTION TO *MESH 17*:

Experimenta's signature journal *Mesh* is its critically acclaimed online publication, for filmmakers, artists, writers and theorists working in Australian screen and media arts culture. *Mesh* not only provides the opportunity for artists, writers and cultural commentators and theorists to increase their profile within Australia and internationally, but also explores critical, aesthetic and technological issues related to screen culture and media arts practice, engendering public dialogue around technical and conceptual issues facing media arts culture, with a visionary take on current and future visions of the world and social and political issues that face contemporary Australia.

Mesh 17 investigates the current state of play in Australian and international contemporary media arts with a particular focus on South East Asia, exploring directions in current practice and investigating the application of new technological developments. By looking at international organisations that are fostering new developments in media arts, *Mesh 17* forms a valuable resource for Australian artists and arts organisations seeking to develop and tour work. Because many Australian artists represent the cutting-edge of current practice, *Mesh 17* also profiles their work in a broader context.

As with *Broadsheet's* recent presentation of texts from *2004 MAAP [Multimedia Art Asia Pacific]* in Singapore [Volume 33 No 3], this issue presents a series of texts from *Mesh 17*, giving its online existence some 'hardcopy' publication, establishing both a continuum between *MAAP* and *Mesh* in terms of content and focus, and a further dissemination of critical analysis of Australian and regional contemporary new media practice. *Mesh* editors Russell Smith and Sarah Tutton introduce texts on contemporary Chinese and Japanese new media practice, followed by profiles on Australian artists Shaun Gladwell, David Rosetzky, Eavesdrop Project, Susan Norrie and Jonathan Jones. Additional to these *Broadsheet* published texts are online, keynote essays on Australian, Thai, Singaporean and Indian new media art, and further artist profiles on Nalin Malani [India], Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries [Korea], Tadasu Takamine [Japan], Wang Jianwei [China], Daniel Crooks [Australia], RAQS Collective [India], Destiny Deacon [Australia], Matthew Ngui [Singapore], Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba [Vietnam], Dumb Type [Japan], and Linda Wallace [Australia].

Similarly, despite its shortcomings, 'new media art' is a term that has established itself in recent years as an internationally recognised category of artistic practice. This is due in part to the use of phrases such as 'new media', 'media art' and 'new media art' in influential contexts such as events promotions, book titles and education programs. But what it can be taken to define is another matter. Some theorists would confine the category to the use of digital technologies. For instance, Lev Manovich's hugely influential *The Language of New Media* is primarily an exploration of the aesthetic implications of numerical representation, a technical definition that rejects many of the 'fuzzier' characteristics of new media [such as random access or interactivity] as already present in older media.² Other theorists define the term in a less precise and technical way, arguing that new media art might be distinguished not so much by the media used as by the historical context of an increasingly media saturated social and political environment. In this sense, the essence of new media art is not a question of technology, but of sensibility. It encompasses a cluster of formal and thematic explorations in various media, relating to the changes in social relations brought about by both new technologies and new uses of old technologies – themes of identity, representation, networking, mobility, surveillance – in short, to adapt a phrase from Jean Baudrillard, 'the agony and the ecstasy of communication'.

This is closer to the view we have chosen to take, seeing the actual social uses and abuses of technology as ultimately far more interesting and unpredictable than the virtual futures speculated upon by technological determinists. For instance, as Friedrich Kittler shows in his study of now ancient recording technologies, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, who could have predicted from a technical analysis of the object itself, that the humble typewriter would have ushered in such massive changes in the gender composition of the white collar workforce?³ Every technology does so much more than, or less than, or different to what it was designed for.

Not only this, but technically incidental changes in the size, weight, accessibility, ease of use and above all the *cost* of technologies significantly change the way they are used socially and artistically. Part of the rise of video art in recent years has less to do with the maturity of the medium or a belated acceptance of its artistic validity, and more to do with the declining cost of the equipment, increased accessibility and ease of editing. Only once technologies become ubiquitous, familiar, banal and even invisible, does the task of making interesting art become interestingly difficult.

To those oriented towards the hi-tech end of the new media spectrum – the end concerned with virtual and mixed reality platforms, live networked events, and interactive and immersive streams of data – the particular preoccupation with video in this issue of *Mesh* might seem a little retro. But contemporary video art, eg. especially as practised in China, can be seen as representative of what we have called a 'new media sensibility', one that is perhaps a little bored with the technical, conceptual and aesthetic possibilities of the technology itself, and instead seeks to put it to work in an active and relational intervention into social and political issues. This new media sensibility is in some ways a sober maturation after the dotcom crash and 1990s hype about virtual reality, immersion and interactivity. Korean based Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries categorically rejects the fetishisation of non-linearity and interactivity in much digital art, instead using Flash software to create works that involve nothing more than edited sequences of black and white text accompanied by a jazz soundtrack, a thoroughly cinematic aesthetic that could have been created using the technologies available in the 1930s. "I have a special dislike for interactivity. To me it's a paltry, laughable thing, like getting a kick out of pulling the trigger of a gun: click: bang. I don't get it. When I click on interactive art, I get the feeling I'm the rat in the Skinner box, except there's only the miserable reward, not the shock. Art isn't reward, it's shock, or something approaching it, something I would call beauty."⁴ There seems to be something essential in this linking of shock and beauty. The more an artwork empowers viewers by giving them creative control, the less possibility there is of the unexpected encounter that is the essence of aesthetic experience.

So too, one of the clichés of 1990s media hype was the concept of global connectedness and mobility; the effortless border-crossing of a cordless lifestyle of laptops, palm pilots and global roaming mobile phones. Inevitably a signifier of white first-world privilege, the gap between the globally mobile and the locally enclaved has become ever wider since the declaration of the so-called War on Terror. It's not so much that the techno utopias came crashing back to earth – right from the start they were for the few, not the many.

At their blandest, both new media and contemporary art can be seen as truly global commodities, designed to be compatible across international borders, thanks to standardisation of both hardware [the PC and the white cube] and software [Windows and conceptual art]. But technologies only really start to 'work' once they are adapted to local conditions and immediate concerns. Therefore, we have tried to avoid any suggestion that the richer

countries surveyed here – Australia, Singapore, Japan – are in any way ahead when it comes to new media art, simply by virtue of a greater access to new technologies. The cutting-edge technologically can often be very dull artistically.

Inevitably, new media art must connect, not just with the network but with people, individuals and communities. Tokyo born, US-educated Jan Nguyen-Hatsushiba makes the extraordinary and courageous decision to base his artistic practice in Ho Chi Minh City; the media artists and activists involved in Sarai's *Cybermohalla* project, while globally recognised, are deeply engaged with impoverished urban neighbourhoods in various parts of Delhi; the avant-garde politics of 'live art' in contemporary Chinese video practice is often highly site-specific and designed to intervene in topical local issues. In each case, the use of new media is not about connecting to a global network, but using new media practices and techniques to connect local communities that, despite their physical proximity, often remain worlds apart.

In his report on new media art in Japan, Fumihiko Sumitomo is critical of the obsession of *otaku* [geeks] with the electronic gadgetry of the Akihabara district, an obsession which is accompanied by a tendency to disconnect from social issues. The best of these artists, he concludes, are those who begin with an interest in people, gestures and behaviour, and use technology as a means of exploring this. Similarly, Lee Weng Choy is critical of breezily casual attitudes to the hyperreality of images in Singaporean new media art. He turns instead to a consideration of Ho Tzu Nyen's *Utama – Every Name in History is I*, a complex work that combines digital imaging, painting and film in a way that measures the historical weight of images and technologies of representation, rather than simply dissolving them in the stream of digitisation. Julianne Pierce, writing from Australia, questions the lack of public investment in and support for new media, arguing that while a number of countries in the Asian region are increasing the scale, sophistication and global profile of their new media art practices, Australia risks remaining at the margins of this regional development.

If these First World writers are variously concerned about disconnectedness, by contrast the essays from China, India and Thailand frequently note the intense social and political engagement of new media artists. Thomas Berghuis notes how the concept of 'transcending media' in Chinese contemporary art practice encapsulates a range of emerging hybrid forms that combine video and digital technologies with radical performances and interventions in public space, creating an

intensely local, often site-specific avant-garde practice. Similarly, Gridthiya Gawewong notes that, while many younger Thai artists are turning to new technologies in ways that involve little more than 'a kind of formal fetishisation', there are important artists who are able to combine traditional techniques and new media in a thoughtful critical engagement with contemporary society. Finally, Johann Pijnappel notes how new media art in India, specifically video art, often seeks to strike an uneasy compromise between radical engagement with indigenous Indian issues, particularly involving the role of women in Indian society, and a calculated appeal to the exhibition opportunities provided by the international contemporary art scene.

In each case, and whatever your definitions, new media art is a growing and vibrant sector of the Asian arts community. Artists have become increasingly skilled at adapting their use of new technologies to their diverse cultural backgrounds, creating new and exciting models and platforms for cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary practice.

However, Australia's current role in the Asian arts community is minimal and insecure. Despite ad hoc successes and achievements driven by committed individuals and Asia-focused organisations such as the Queensland Art Gallery, Asialink and Asia Australia Arts Centre [4a Gallery], Australia has failed to develop a strategic approach to its engagement with Asia. Arts practitioners in Asia are becoming increasingly confident and international in outlook, expanding their networks both within Asia and around the world. But Australia is often left out of both the thinking and the activities in the region, partly because of the limited opportunities that it offers [limited funding and small scale projects], partly because of its political positioning, which, exacerbated by local media, has significantly damaged its reputation within the region. The re-election of the Bush and Howard governments threatens to make building these connections even more difficult. Now, more than ever, Australian new media artists and arts organisations need to be proactive in their engagement with their counterparts in Asia, particularly in the likely absence of significant government support.

Notes

¹ Martin Lister *et al.*, *New Media: A Critical Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2003: 9

² Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001: 18–61

³ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999: 183–198

⁴ Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, *Threads of the Women Maze* [International Women's University], 2000, <http://www.universes-in-universe.de/woven-maze/chang/index.html> [5 November 2004]