

THE COUNCIL THAT MISTOOK NEW MEDIA FOR THE VISUAL ARTS



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In December 2004 I wrote,

*In a devastatingly serious failure of nerve, shocking ignorance of the state of the arts, let alone total absence of the marketplace verve for which it has lately come to pride itself, the Australia Council for the Arts has 'dissolved' its New Media Arts Board [NMAB], distributing its charges to the Visual Arts/Craft and Music Boards respectively. The responsibility for the hybrid arts component of the NMAB will now be in the hands of a newly invented 'Inter-Arts Office' [not a Board, and apparently therefore without continuous peer assessor presence], which will 'triage' funding applicants to appropriate traditional artform boards. Triage? Are we now 'patients'? It's only a step on from the perverse misnomer of 'clients' and it complements the ill state of the many badly under-funded arts companies across the country. But who exactly is sick? Could it be the Australia Council itself?*¹

Above all, has the Australia Council lost a vision of the future that it once had in its sights? Has it developed a blind spot? Is it mistaking new media for the visual arts? They are, of course, the same thing and they are significantly different. There are areas of overlap and there are foreign territories. What some crudely portray as a 'painting-versus-new-media battle' requires differentiation and is not about superiority or power, but the development of new forms, neither as derivative or opportunistic nor as short of history as their critics would claim. Since the appearance of the Council's press release of December 8, 2004, anger about the projected restructure has been widespread, with protest meetings being held in most states and messages of complaint delivered to the Council, including one from ArtsPeak, the forum of Australia's peak arts organisations. The Public Sector Union, representing Australia Council staff, put out a strongly worded press release rejecting Council's claim that fifty per cent of staff were knowingly consulted as part of the review process [January 24, 2005]. It's the lack of consultation with stakeholders [artists, organisations and state and local governments] rather than restructure per se that has generated most anxiety and hostility. The restructure was presented as a *fait accompli*. The Council's rationale? That the review was strictly internal and not to be confused with the various initiatives and strategies where Council does consult. In other words, mind your own business.

DON'T LOOK NOW

A blind Council [the metaphor most commonly applied by many of my correspondents] failed to see that its erasure of the New Media Arts and the Community Cultural Development Boards looks much more than internal. As in previous restructures, long term effects are bound to be felt by practitioners now without representation on Council, their peer expertise seriously depleted or disappeared and international standing erased. Australia no longer rates new media arts and community cultural development. Council's exhortation not to worry, that funding for these fields will remain the same, does not convince, if the infrastructure around them is to be removed or their standing relegated to small print. More than money is at stake. But on that count, just how long will the artform boards stand by a commitment to new media and hybrid arts?

Just as worrying is the Council's removal of boards that most clearly support politically contentious work. Whether intentional or not, this move parallels the federal government's hostility to pluralism, amounting here to a cultural coup on their behalf.

LIMITED VIEW

The question that looms largest is why the Future Planning Taskforce targeted two boards and not the whole board structure of the Australia Council at a critical moment in the organisation's history. Why has it complicated artform funding with a muddle of some peer assessment, some not, some continuous, some not, the addition of an Inter-Arts Office and a split between the artform boards and the new Key Organisations section? Now add the bizarrely and politically problematic 'peering' by Council itself – selecting from the big works put up by the new artform über-Directors to make the federal government sit up and look, says Jennifer Bott, "at the difference the arts can make". What kind of structure is this?

Cutting NMAB has been sold as cost-effective – a small board is expensive to maintain, regardless of its successes and high international standing. However, this Board's evolution has significantly paralleled expanding new media infrastructure in education, commerce and broadcasting, not to mention in the everyday lives of millions of Australians online, on mobile phones, iPods and at computer games – all potential and actual sites for new art. None of this seems to matter. As Richard Letts writes, "Council membership will be bereft of expertise in community cultural

development and even more importantly, given the extremely rapid changes in the area, new media arts."² A deaf Council, as well as blind.

NO DEBATE

Most galling about this cultural coup, the failure to consult and an increasingly autocratic bureaucratic structure, has been the absence of an aesthetic rationale for the restructure. There was no report on the reasons for the changes to new media art's standing for stakeholders to read, discuss and debate, until a few days before a workshop between the Task Force and representatives of the new media and hybrid arts field held on February 22 at the Australia Council's office in Sydney. For that meeting a paper was distributed [and subsequently posted on the council website]. Otherwise bereft of an aesthetic rationale, the paper does make clear what we've suspected all along, a motive for the dissolution of the New Media Arts Board: "The Task Force was clearly of the opinion that new media is not, in itself, an artform".³ However, sound art would be categorised as 'new media sound art', under New Work, in the Music Board. Workshop chair and Task Force member [and former Chair of the New Media arts Board] Michael Snelling explained his support for the field, but also for the dissolution of the Board, citing the artform issue and especially the need for traditional artform Boards to embrace new media art instead of resiling from it, as the creation of NMAB had allowed them to. Workshop participants [Kim Machan, Lyndal Jones, Rea, Mike Stubbs, Francesca da Rimini, David Cranswick, Sarah Miller, Caroline Farmer and myself] made it clear that we thought new media art a field of practices sufficiently distinctive and offering major opportunities for artists, for the many students training in the field, for commercial and university partnerships and communication with considerable new audiences [a Council priority] to warrant even greater attention to it. Why, we asked, was Council heading away from the future?

SEEING IS BELIEVING

The prevalent imagery constellating around the proposed restructure is of seeing and not-seeing, of light and dark. People feel they have been 'kept in the dark'; the day of hearing about the restructure is described by one hybrid arts practitioner as 'Black Friday', Council is described as "short-sighted", "lacking vision" and as "switching off the light and returning the Australian art scene to the dark ages... slipping us into oblivion." Overarching these are, "a failure of vision", "a loss of direction", "a step backward", "regression" and "going off the map". The proposed return of new media and hybrid art practices to traditional artform boards

and the structures of the past struck PICA's Sarah Miller as regressive. She wrote to Jennifer Bott, "I am very familiar with the ineffectual and cumbersome nature of that system. Its inadequacies were one of the key reasons for setting up the then Hybrid Arts Committee – now New Media Arts Board – in the first place."⁴

There is much that could be fruitfully discussed about the relationship between new media and visual arts before launching into an ill-advised restructuring. New media arts practitioners come from many backgrounds [film, biology, communications, physics, architecture etc.] and not least of all from the visual arts – already an astonishingly varied field [to the chagrin of conservative critics]. Many former visual artists now declare themselves media artists or new media artists, but not all. Central to the issue here is the assumption by some in the visual arts that new media art comprises performance, installation, photography, video and little more, a view only too evident in "Why new media rule", the first chapter of Peter Timms' *What's Wrong with Contemporary Art?* It looks like the Taskforce has a similar view.

In an email from Jennifer Bott to various complainants, the Australia Council CEO reported that the Taskforce decided to give most of New Media Arts Board domain to the Visual Arts and Crafts Board, because, "In analysing the Board's funding patterns we found that roughly eighty-five per cent of the new media work that the NMAB supports is in visual media."⁵ Is THE VISUAL SUFFICIENT aesthetic rationale for the dissolving of NMAB?

Reflecting on the promise of Australian new media arts and the corralling of it into visual arts, a leading sound artist and academic, Garth Paine, wrote to me:

It is a fallacy that the VACB can absorb this practice – they see video art as a substantial practice and they don't see past that in terms of digital or electronic arts. When there are so many major international conferences, exhibitions, centres of research and excellence and associated institutions committed entirely to electronic arts, how can we not deem it sufficiently important for a focused policy within the Australia Council? I am at a loss to explain this. It seems to me, in fairly conservative Australia, that video art is seen as fully representing electronic arts practice. Of course nothing could be farther from the truth – a generally



Proposed model for Australia Council New Media Art and the Inter-arts Office

23 February 2005

Introduction

The New Media Arts Board (NMAB) has been established as a board of the Australia Council since 1998. Previous to that time, it operated as a committee of the Council (between the 1996 restructure and 1998) and prior to that, as the hybrid arts committee, variously a committee of the then Performing Arts Board, and then of the Council itself.

The Board has been very successful in the support of and development of new activities in Australian art. But it has also increasingly developed a split personality as it tries to support both work in new media and hybrid work that cuts across any kind of artform classification. The Task Force recognised that the current situation is less than ideal, and also thought hard about the comments from staff that there are still many artists working at the cutting edge who do not see themselves as having any route into the Australia Council's funding.

Ultimately the Task Force took the decision that art in new media and some cross-artform activities can and should be funded through the same processes as more conventional practice. This conclusion was bolstered by the realisation that the Visual Arts and Craft Board (VACB), in particular, is already funding a significant level of new media activity. The Task Force of course recognised that this will require changes to criteria and to boards. The Task Force was clearly of the opinion that new media art is not, in itself, an artform.

At the same time, the Task Force wanted to create a more flexible and responsive way to support practices that cannot find their way to artform boards, including bio-art and other hybrid activities, as well as those who currently feel disenfranchised by the Australia Council's funding mechanisms.

To this end they designed a flexible funding mechanism in the Inter-Arts office (IAC). This area will have a remit to support those practices that cannot reasonably be assessed within the artform board structure. Obviously, the Inter-Arts office must ensure that wherever possible funding applications are assessed by artform boards, but it will have a budget, and peer review mechanisms to support even the unconventional funding opportunities.

The advantages of an Inter-Arts office therefore include:

- It can continue the very effective work done by the NMAB in supporting hybrid initiatives, while having greater flexibility to proactively spend time identifying new, cutting edge practice
- It can be flexible in what it supports, not constrained by a static suite of grant categories or while still calling on peers from boards, staff and other practitioners to competitively assess proposals
- The costs of a "normal" board would also be excessive for the amount of money currently allocated in this area.

Proposed Australia Council model... downloaded from their website 6 March, 2005

*fixed temporal form, burned to a fixed media, it is a valuable art form, but one that does not address many of the central tenets of electronic arts – interactivity, networks, AI, etc. However, the fine arts establishment seems to have accepted it as economic currency – the art markets and biennales are trading in video art, so it has a legitimacy that other forms have not yet attained. Should this determine the policy of creative and artistic development/nurturing of the pre-eminent arts funding body in Australia?*⁶

It's encouraging that many visual artists have expressed their solidarity with new media artists in this crisis.

BEYOND SEEING

New media art goes way beyond video as revealed by the recent 2004 *BEAP* [Biennial of Electronic Arts Perth] with works emerging from biology, sound science, physics, robotics, IT and virtual reality explorations, suggesting new ways not just

of seeing but of an expanded sensory field, some of it relating to recent work with the blind and deaf. These works were largely exhibited in galleries, but as is often the case in new media arts, not always to advantage. New spaces have to be imagined and developed, as they have with the Australian Centre for the Moving Image [ACMI]. And then there is all the art beyond galleries that will be seen, heard and felt via portable and home technologies.

As Jon Smithies, former head of ACMI, eloquently argued on Artshub Australia,⁷ new media art not only has enormous promise in the still early days of its development but is an artform in its own right, a diverse one with everything an artform should have: new tools, new channels of distribution, new patterns of remuneration and new ways of engaging and making audiences. These alone should warrant the preservation of NMAB. At the January 24 Sydney meeting to discuss the Australia Council restructure, artist and academic Anna Munster argued for NMAB's importance in terms of its support for

experiment, that the Australia Council should have a board committed to it; artist Lynette Wallworth declared new media art an emerging form, impossible to categorise in simple terms because it requires knowledge of and responsiveness to constant changes in technology, and a willingness to fund the unpredictable. The New Media Arts Board had performed wonderfully well in this respect.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

The dissolving of the NMAB is out of sync with a plethora of new media art activity and investment in Australia: the ongoing exhibitions at ACMI that have surveyed two decades of evolution of new forms; the peak new media arts organisation ANAT [Australian Network of Art and Technology] and its important work with indigenous artists; the Synapse program which brings together artists and scientists; Sydney's dLux Media Arts, the many artists and companies at work in the field and some key books from, among others, Darren Tofts. There are also the major events that celebrate new media and hybrid arts – *MAAP* [Multimedia Arts Asia Pacific, this year held in Singapore], *SOOB* [Straight Out of Brisbane], *Electrofringe* [Newcastle], the *Time_Space* hybrid performance laboratory, and *Unsound* [Wagga Wagga]. Most of Australia's international film festivals now have dedicated new media programs. The work of Australian new media artists is widely distributed and internationally admired and reflects a broader Australian curiosity about innovation and new technologies. For over a decade *RealTime*, the national magazine focused on innovation in the arts, has reported and responded to a wealth of new media art and hybrid creations. These fields represent a critical area for young artists – as reflected in *SOOB* and *Electrofringe* – and increasingly in regional and community arts [as CCD artists have made clear in their protests]. Anna Munster and Lynette Wallworth both despair that young artists recently trained in and committed to new media art that is integral to their lives will not find a clearly demarcated space for their practice in the restructured Australia Council. How will the Visual Arts/Craft Board handle the revolution in mobile phone art embraced by the 2005 Adelaide Film Festival in collaboration with ANAT? Short film is the model here, not painting, sculpture or installation.

It's deeply disturbing to find the Australia Council blind to and in denial of an emerging new media arts ecology of some thirty years [and much longer in hybrid practices] that is responding to and engaged in profound changes to our lives and culture, artistically

and commercially. I was on the first short-lived Cross-Artform committee of the Australia Council in 1985 and have witnessed all the stages in between then and now. In that time there has been a considered and richly creative evolution of new forms, a potent meeting of the analogue and digital, a new fecundity worthy of a name, a place and representation at every level and which, up until now the Australia Council was bravely a part of, a collaborator and a nurturer.

The commonest response to this crisis has been to argue for the status quo to continue for 2005, with a moratorium on change for twelve months, in which time Council, artists, organisations and other stakeholders can debate the proposed restructure. However, the late addition of the consultative workshops with the task force might change this push if common ground can be found and the standing of new media arts preserved. But broader dissatisfaction with the whole restructure from peak arts organisations might override artform specificities.

Money is not the issue. It's about the very standing of new media and hybrid arts. Demote them, hide them away, bury them, deny their power and potential as discrete, palpable forms and you disappear them. They're in Council's blind spot – don't let this blind the rest of Australia or the world to their worth.

John Smithies writes:

*The existence of new media art is a fact. It will require a generational change before the body of work in existence today and that being created tomorrow will be recognised. In the meantime the momentum continues and Australia's art world has to embrace the difference or risk becoming a speck in the rear view mirror on the dashboard of new media art.*⁸

Notes

¹ Keith Gallasch, 'Australia Council restructures: New media arts wasted', *RealTime* [emailout], December 9, 2004

² Music Forum, Music Council of Australia, February 2005

³ Task Force paper on new media arts, received February 18

⁴ December 9, 2004

⁵ December 23, 2004

⁶ December 10, 2004

⁷ www.artshub.com.au, December 20, 2004

⁸ www.artshub.com.au, December 20, 2004