

# The end of new media art?

Based on a paper presented at *Being Digital*, the 2000 dLux media|arts d>art forum, at the Sydney Film Festival, 15 April 2000. Published in *RealTime* 38 (August 2000).

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Electronic art projects itself into the future. Drawing as it does on rapidly changing technology, it's always looking out for the next wave, a new process, a new platform. As the technology industries continue to generate novelty — a mixture of promises and products — at a breathtaking rate, artists adopt and adapt both the rhetoric and the technology, slipstreaming behind the biggest, fastest juggernaut around.

So in the year when, as a child, I imagined the future would finally arrive, there is an interesting, subtle sense of pressure on the electronic arts — as if they too should be finally “arriving,” coming up with the goods, delivering on their promises and aspirations, breaking into the mainstream. At the same time, the status of the electronic arts is undergoing perhaps its most serious challenge — because the future *is* arriving, in a straightforward, quotidian way, but it's arriving all over the place, indiscriminately and without regard for who's been waiting the longest. Here I want to discuss that challenge, and show how it may ultimately — in fact *hopefully* — bring about the end of “electronic art,” “digital art” and “new media art” as they currently exist.

This challenge arises quietly, as a particular threshold is crossed — a threshold of technological saturation. Over the past decade, high-tech (and specifically digital) media forms have proliferated to the point of being ubiquitous in our everyday lives. Almost every manufactured image that we see — every laser-printed flyer taped to a pole, every book jacket, every billboard, every TV ad — is now a high-tech artefact, a product of layers of digital processing and production. Film, a uniquely persistent analogue medium, is embracing digital production. An overwhelming majority of the audio which we encounter is “digital” — at least in its means of reproduction, though increasingly in its creation as well. At the same time, “new” media forms

(email, the web, console games, mobile phones) are threading themselves ever more tightly into everyday life.

A couple of years ago a new Coles supermarket opened in my neighbourhood, complete with an array of beautiful, flat LCD touchscreens which function as cash registers and point-of-sale advertising displays. When I first saw those screens, I was struck by their potential; I imagined somehow appropriating them for a lavish interactive artwork. They looked so incongruous; precious technological artefacts surrounded by racks of chewing gum and magazines. At some point since then, though, the screens changed: the supermarket assimilated them; now I just see cash registers with banner ads.

The saturation of our lives, and our culture, in media technology, is predictable enough; the process has been clearly underway for decades. What's more interesting here — and what the supermarket story illustrates — is that this process has finally reached a point where these media technologies are completely unremarkable. The “digitalness” of a CD simply doesn't matter (any more); nor does the fact that the titles for the evening news are computer-generated, or that the newspaper was digitally typeset. Even where the technology itself is unavoidable, the rhetoric around it now concentrates on basic utility value. The commercial, consumer web packages itself as a lifestyle-enhancer, a time-saver, an appliance, but never as a technology.

This process of disappearance or dissolution is facilitated by the increasing sophistication of digital media technologies. This is clear in Hollywood cinema, where digital technique is crossing a corresponding threshold of perception; nobody remembers the computer graphics in *Saving Private Ryan*. Contrast this with the self-referential graphics of ten or twenty years ago; remember the opening titles to the first series of “Towards 2000”? Glowing wireframe jet planes and spacecraft zoom out of the screen. The

message was clear: "the future is technology, and it's coming right for you." Now that we're here, the glowing wireframe is a retro icon for a simpler time. Contemporary media technology is a shape-shifter — it puts on the skins of forms it's killed (film grain filters, lens flare effects, vinyl crackle plug-ins) — but can look and sound like anything, or nothing.

What does this shift mean for the electronic or "new media" arts? In one sense, it means almost nothing, or rather, more of the same. As media technologies become more sophisticated and more accessible, the arts benefit; more room for experimentation and play, more potential, more power, more scope. These have always been the payoffs for riding with the technology juggernaut. In another sense however, this shift represents a significant challenge to the ways in which the high-tech arts construct and identify themselves.

Sparked perhaps by the reluctance of the established art-world to accept their work, artists using electronic media have gathered, over the past two decades, under such generic banners as "electronic art," "digital art," and "new media art." An active international scene has emerged, with its own institutions, events, stars, critics, and gossip, all organised around a common creative engagement with technology. This identification with a technological medium has been useful in many ways: technology is a drawcard, a (largely) positive cultural marker, often attractive to the powers that be. While often highly critical of its technologies of choice, electronic art has also been happy to borrow the progressive rhetorics of "cutting edge" technoculture for self-promotional purposes.

That rhetoric only works, though, when the technologies involved are new and exotic, and as argued above, digital media are no longer either of those things. Where does this leave (not-so-) new media art? Those with a hankering for the experimental fringes will no doubt continue to seek out esoteric and emerging technologies; biotech art is already a reality, no doubt nanotech art is close at hand. Having been crowded out of digital media, the high-tech avant-garde might simply move elsewhere. However there is another option which is more radical, but also more interesting:

what if artists working with technology stopped identifying their practice as "new media art" or "digital art"? How useful are these designators in a culture in which digital media are the ascendant status quo? What if the technology-based banners for this field were simply taken down, now that their age is starting to show?

Suppose for a moment that this were possible, and imagine the consequences. It might demonstrate that these generic labels have *never* been a useful way of thinking about, or engaging with, this work. They lump a diverse range of work into a category which ignores the most interesting aspects of the work — its content — and concentrates on a set of technical and production processes. If that category were to dissolve — as it is dissolving in culture at large — we might find a more complex way of thinking about this work. All those clusters of shared values, approaches and aesthetics which already exist within new media practice would come to the fore — those groupings would be recognised, rather than subsumed. At the same time, the networks of trans-disciplinary influence and continuity which already run across the field would develop. These banners involve an act of differentiation, a declaration of a separate practice — yet among the richest zones are those where electronic media meet existing creative and discursive traditions.

The notion of "new media" as some kind of radical move and/or critical problem will, with any luck, recede. That hoary old excuse for the uneven quality of new media practice — that it's "early days", and that "in X years we'll look back on this as the beginning of a new era" — will go with it. More space and energy will be left for a real engagement with the work, in all its cultural and creative specificity. Of course this is not to propose that the media themselves should be ignored, either by artists or critics. The process of grappling with the medium is part of doing creative work, just as the process of deconstructing, interrogating and analysing those media is part of critical work. In rapidly-changing domains such as the web, these processes are crucial, and certainly net.art plays an ever-more-essential role in offering alternative ways of thinking through that medium. Still, there's more to it than that.

What about those organisations structured around medium-specific banners? What of the funding bodies, who play an important role in the construction of those categories of practice? Without the banners of “new media” or “digital art,” and the sense of solidarity and legitimacy which they bring with them, artists may find it even more difficult to gain support for their work. It’s these (important) pragmatics which will most likely ensure that this thought-experiment is never realised. Take it instead as a wistful vision, an imaginary sprawling continuum of high- and low-tech art, peacefully co-existing and intermingling. Or better, a polemical jolt, a hypothetical. Either way, the wider process which sparked it is obstinately real; the “new media” are becoming everyday, unremarkable, imperceptible, ubiquitous — and they won’t be new for long. Similarly, the best thing that could happen to “new media art” would be for it to dissolve — not vanish, but dissolve — and for the medium to give way to the work.