

Editorial

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Finding new terminology for emerging art and cultural practices or for media and technological constellations is bound to be contentious. On lists, blogs and during face-to-face forums and conferences we continue to debate what the term new media entails, let alone whether this provides an umbrella for wearable computing, smart materials, mobile phone movies or bioart. It is clear that computational culture is drifting, fragmenting and laterally expanding: terminals are no longer dedicated; cultural producers are now recurrent and mobile multi-taskers; art is online, on the street, on a screen and coming at you from a million different places, now.

Rather than try to define the terminology or taxonomy of distributed art theories and practices we have proposed instead a descriptor for the ‘aesthesia’ of contemporary networked encounters. Distributed aesthetics, then, concerns experiences that are sensed, lived and produced in more than one place and time. This might equally be a sketch of reconsiderations of the operations of cultural memory or of phenomena such as endurance performances. But what we propose, through gathering together the disparate pieces in this fibreculture journal issue, is that techno-social networks are crucially constitutive of this distributed aesthesia. In various ways, all the texts here take up the mode through which ‘the network’ – the juncture and disjunction of here and there, you and I, social and individuated – functions as the crucial operand in dispersing and contouring perception, art practice and aesthetics.

It would be unwise, however, to assign distributed aesthetics the role of the ‘new’ new media. As Darren Tofts cogently demonstrates in his analysis of the burgeoning Australian media arts scene of the late 1970s and 1980s, certain network formations pre-date the current raft of theorisation. By re-visiting work from the 1980s by artists such as Philip Brophy and the band Tsk-Tsk-Tsk, which included street stencil art, live performances, video events and gallery shows, Tofts invites us to unpack media art as a temporally staggered and distributed event. The importance of drawing our attention to these pre-figurations of networked aesthetics lies in both highlighting the rich and remediated history of media arts and in sobering the frenzy around the fad for relational aesthetics doing the global rounds of art galleries and conferences. Like the Flash mobbing that arises from current distributed media, these earlier media art events depended upon a participatory audience prepared to facilitate information about the works’ distributed times and places. Geert Lovink and Anna Munster, on the other hand, discern a particular aesthetic dominating contemporary imaginings of the network, which they title ‘the will to network mapping’. In a series of speculative propositions that seek to move towards a social rather than formal aesthetics, Lovink and Munster prise this image of the network as an ever-growing euphoric entity to be charted via links and nodes away from biologicistic and organisational metaphors. Instead, they suggest, networks are human constructions and their ‘aesthesia’ must come to terms with all too human experiences of frustration, boredom and labour that comprise life lived in and with distributed media.

From an altogether different perspective, Greg Turner-Rahman empirically explores the practices of resource, knowledge and skill sharing among online design communities that

amount to a literal distribution of aesthetics. He offers us a different version of design practice, which is often only considered from the point of view of its corporate environment where the one-way transmission of brief from client to designer holds sway. Instead, Turner-Rahman compares an imaginative if more marginal set of designers who are operating in 'open-source' mode. Yet this is not an essay that is simply celebratory of the 'network way' again. We are invited to think through the felt tension of changes in design culture as it attempts to straddle both entrenched corporate and emerging online modes of production.

One of the most satisfying aspects of working on this issue of the fibreculture journal has been the response we have received from artists to the meshwork of issues covered by distributed media, art and practice. Satisfying because these responses tend to experiment with how to do distribution rather than worrying about the finer details of what it should comprise. In the extracts from 'Portrait of the VJ', Mark Amerika splices the cut and paste rhythms of computerised text with the slide and sampling of distributed audiovisual performance that characterise the art of VJing. The VJ is a provocateur whose improvisational and hybridised practice recombines traditional art forms such as film with experimental writing, electronica and video, software and net art. In his own VJ art Amerika explores and performs the complex agency of images and sounds, often on-the-fly and comprised from a palimpsest of memories, perceptions, experimental digital effects, and geophysical and virtual networks. Such 'visual hypertextuality' is also a feature of Simon Biggs' distributed and shared environments. In Babel, Biggs confounds the conventional geometry of vision – typically represented by an inverted triangle where the apex equates to the singular eye of the Cartesian subject – by creating a multi-user remote networking system so that what we see simultaneously includes the multiple perspectives of other viewers at dispersed physical and online locations. The installation Parallax also challenges the supposedly homologous relation between vision and self by creating a collective and interactive visual experience, effectively interspersing the behaviour of virtual objects in the screen with the multiple movements of inter-actors within the installation space. Keith Armstrong's Intimate Transactions provides us with another practice-led contribution to research on the felt disjunction of networks/artworks. Armstrong's essay is valuable in that it demonstrates that aesthetically working through the design of embodied and networked interfaces can also produce a theoretical and practical framework for artists. He names this 'ecosophical' – a thinking through of artist, interface, participant and artwork as a mutable ecology that produces change and difference for all nodes and interrelations.

If artists are busy distributing the event and object that we might once have called an art work, how are audiences and institutions reacting to and even re-constituting themselves as part of net-art-works? Although we may have heard quite a lot about the ubiquity of audience and the disappearance of the gallery with respect to online art, nevertheless exhibitions, installations and institutions stubbornly remain in all their localisation. Yet as Vince Dziekan points out, art galleries are increasingly both virtualised (their Web presence often producing entirely different aesthetic and cultural modes of engagement) and their infrastructure digitised. What, then, does this mean for the site-specificity of such institutions? Rather than take an online gallery as exemplary of such forces of distribution, Dziekan gives us a detailed polemic that brings distributed aesthetics into contact with the National Gallery of Victoria. Here we get a sense of the ways in which an institution wrestles with the experience of being dispersed between informatic and physical space and how its curatorial practices might negotiate this tension.

Of course as denizens of new media art we are already familiar with the splitting and conjoining of 'the virtual' and 'the physical' through analysis of virtual reality art work throughout the 1990s. In her article 'Reshaping Spectatorship: Immersive and Distributed Aesthetics' Edwina Bartlem challenges the notion that immersive VR or VE art and distributed or networked art are of a different experiential or perceptual order. Both immersive and distributed aesthetics, she argues, provide the conditions for a mediated yet fully engaging telepresence, which can effectively shift our understanding of art spectatorship from passive to performative mode and transform how we interpret and experience community, the human-technology relation and our own corporeality and consciousness. Susan Ballard is also concerned with a thorn in the side of new media theory, albeit a somewhat older one – entropy. Resonating with a problem that is of concern for other authors in this issue – namely, the transmission model of distributing signal – Ballard argues that entropy is not the downside to information being pushed around a space. Rather than the decay of signal, art that harnesses the material forces of leakage and dispersal might actually constitute a kind of networked experience. In examining the ways in which participants, computers, installed spaces and networks inhabit some recent art exhibited in New Zealand, Ballard suggests that fragmentation assists the pieces to materialize in their exhibition space.

What is insightful about the particularity of these analyses from Dzekian, Bartlem, Ballard and Armstrong is that they dig for frayed and uncharted elements of networked media, art and culture instead of lauding the technical as a necessary 'connector' of experience. Overall – and as is fitting for this issue's theme – there seems to be no formal system, no set of objects and no one technology that can serve to ground a distributed aesthetics. But there are certainly enough shifts and cracks occurring to suggest that however we inhabit and imagine networks this habitat and this imaginary have by now thoroughly permeated and reshaped contemporary experience.

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