# An Interview with Steve Dietz

As a concept, the Internet is old hat. Digital video is the norm. Computers are just tools of almost any trade. If artists are not actually using so-called "New Media" technologies to create and inform their work directly these days, they are certainly aware of them. But are the art institutions that show work of contemporary artists keeping pace? What is the status of the "New Media Art" exhibition within the American institution?

Jennifer Crowe sits down with Steve Dietz, Curator of New Media at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota to get some insight.

## By Jennifer Crowe

**Jennifer Crowe**: The Walker Art Center sure takes its role in the risky business of "art and technology" seriously. Is it your location slightly off the beaten path that encourages this kind of risk taking or is it something else?

**Steve Dietz:** I don't think that geographic location has any relation to the Walker's efforts in this arena. Rather, it is its history as a multidisciplinary institution with major, independent programs in the visual arts, performing arts, film/video, and now new media. Also, the "art center" in our title is a kind of mandate to follow contemporary artistic practice wherever it leads, not just its known (historical) forms.

**JC:** Art centers may not be reliant on known historical forms, but neither are (in theory) museums that show contemporary art. Is the difference the mandate to collect?

**SD:** I agree the distinction is fuzzy, and I don't mean to make too much of it. But the Walker, and we are not unique in this regard, has a history of a significant part of programming being accomplished through artist residencies. This, I think, makes the institutional ethos more comfortable with "process," and the idea that supporting the artist does not always end up in a particular "object;" that we won't even necessarily know what the result will be at all. Collecting is not insignificant, but it is a sidebar to the point I was trying to make.

**JC:** Have you experienced a shift in how artwork fueled by the cultural and technological developments of the last ten (and even going back 20 years) is characterized in the context of the art institution? Is the label "New Media Art" still relevant?

**SD:** Some people get passionate about naming the field - new media, cyberarts, net art, etc. I think it is important to have a position about the practice that any such rubric covers, but I'm less interested in the label itself. I think that the art practice that I follow - call it new media - is both relevant and porous. 'New media' exhibitions are beoming increasingly irrelevant. We would no longer do a "painting show" or a "photography show," and I think that except for a historically-grounded survey a decade or more from now, there is little relevance to any show of "new media." The question of promotion is completely different. By and large, the state of the press is so pitiful that issues of newness, technology, cost/market, and copyright are about the only ways it understands when it comes to contextualizing or thematizing new media-based work.

**JC:** Has there been any progress in how new media art has been covered and promoted by the press?

**SD:** I suppose it depends upon what you call progress. I think that moving Matt Mirapaul's "Cybertimes" column to the dead tree edition of the "New York Times" creates a kind of visibility that is significant. I think that more survey articles in art publications are beginning to think about new media. I would say, however, that there remains a kind of DIY critical apparatus that exists primarily on lists and online and that by and large mainstream press does not "get it."

**JC:** Is this just the traditional "I don't get it" that we see whenever new forms of artistic expression are introduced? Does the additional need for a certain level of technical competence on the part of viewers add to the difficulty? Are there other factors?

**SD:** Very sophisticated contemporary arts professionals have been known to say "I just don't get it," yes, and probably there is an element of "pluginitis" - it is in people's wariness/response, but I think it's mostly a matter of time. In time, the people who thrive on networks and computing will be mid-career,

"decorated" artists as well as the ones running publications (virtual and otherwise) and institutions (new media and otherwise), and the audiences will increasingly see these characteristics as normal if not natural. In the meantime, I think it's important to maintain and develop a sophisticated discourse at the same time that crossover discussions are attempted. The best result will be a rich, heterogeneous ecology of art practice, not everyone finally realizing THE answer.

**JC:** What about the promotion of new media art by the museums and institutions that show it?

**SD:** Museums are probably as good as the mainstream press. I thought both "Bitstreams" [ http://www.whitney.org/bitstreams/] and "010101" [http://010101.sfmoma.org/], for all their virtues as shows, were misrepresented by the museum press, which basically played to the press's interests outlined above. There is a bit of a vicious circle here, as, of course, the press office needs to get column inches and on-air minutes. But I want to emphasize that how things play out in the press is different, <u>generally</u>, than how the very same exhibitions are commonly conceptualized by the curators.

**JC:** How can these disconnects be patched? What can curators do to ensure that their own museums "get it"? Does the impetus lie with the institution?

**SD:** To repeat my earlier answer in another way, I agree with William Gibson: "The future has already arrived, it's just unevenly distributed." I argue that any institution committed to exploring the contemporary must grapple with "new media" to some extent, so yes, it is incumbent upon us, but the danger, of course, is that institutions begin to drive practice, when it should be the other way around. The "impetus" is always with the artist.

**JC**: How do you feel about spaces like the Zenith Media Lounge at the New Museum

[http://www.newmuseum.org/]? Can architectural and technological rigidity be a good thing or are these more or less fixed spaces an automatic strike against work that is "beyond interface"? [1]

**SD:** I think the Zenith Media Lounge is important for the fact that a major museum committed real, physical space to new media in an ongoing way. That said, ironically, the architectural limitations of the basement location led to an interesting and dynamic "installation" by Lot/ek [http://www.lot-ek.com]. Unfortunately, the museum has treated the installation as a permanent design with its own, additional set of limitations, and I think one of the lessons the field has learned from the Zenith Media lounge is that its designed constraints sometimes work against the best presentation of other work.

**JC:** What have you seen in other spaces that works better? Where does the potential lie?

**SD:** When "Telematic Connections" [http://telematic.walkerart.org/] was installed at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art [http://www.okcartmuseum.com/], it was clear that they had a "real" budget for installation, and it made a real difference. To some extent, installation issues are not rocket science.

inevitable? I don't know. At the Walker, we are going to try and create a more informal, immersively mediatized space for viewing and presenting work.

Finally, I think that a key is flexibility. There is no one-size-fits-all solution and, in fact, I think that it may be important to think about a variety of types of spaces rather than one "white cube/black box" solution.

**JC:** What might such a space like the one you are creating at the Walker look or function like? What are your goals?

**SD:** Well, given the above, it's perhaps not surprising that the Walker's new "mediatheque" will consist of six related spaces/functions. A lobby, which I view as an important programming space for larger-scale reactive works; an audio space; a lounge; a room of stations oriented toward screen-based work; a small installation gallery; and a small lab. In other words, a series of spaces with which we are trying to do different things rather than assuming that a single space can solve everything.

Equally important to how we are thinking about new media, however, is that the mediatheque will be in the same building, essentially in the balcony, of the performing arts studio. And an

> That said, while I am very interested in the physical interfaces for network-based work, I think there is also a lounge-like solution that has worked well on a temporary basis at various festivals, but seems difficult to instantiate on a permanent basis. Is this inevitable? I don't know.

We can focus on philosophical issues when the resources are available and when they're not, and they're often not, work is compromised and so is the ability to reach a different public.

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upcoming collaborative commission by Raqs Media Collective (New Delhi) and Atelier Bow Wow, an architectural practice in Tokyo, to create a "Temporary Autonomous Sarai" to present net works in an exhibition context points to the kind of transdisciplinary, non-differentiated efforts that are also important, I think.

**JC:** Can you comment on spaces in the planning or building stages -- like Eyebeam Atlelier

[http://www.eyebeam.org] -- or is it simply too soon to tell?

**SD**: Elizabeth Diller [of architects Diller & Scofidio] did a presentation at the Walker Art Center about Eyebeam, and I was bowled over. [2] I can't wait to see it in action. No doubt, there will be problems, but I think it has more potential than any of the other dedicated spaces I have seen from Karlsruhe to Tokyo to Sendai to Helsinki to Youngstown. It's going to take a certain amount daring to figure this thing out, and I hope Eyebeam proceeds apace.

**JC:** What role should didactic materials play in a new media art exhibition? Does new media art call for a different approach?

**SD:** One of the virtues of the Internet is that artists can connect with an audience outside of the mediation of the institutional voice. On the other hand, I think one of the roles of the institution should be to provide some context - preferably in a personal, not institutional voice - for those who want it. There is nothing wrong per se with wall labels, but it would also be interesting to think about other approaches, such as what Chris Fahey's recent AI interface to Rhizome hints at.

**JC:** What makes Fahey's "ada1852" [http://rhizome.org/ada1852/ ] interface to Rhizome so different?

**SD:** Well, as the discussion on Rhizome has shown, it's not so different per se. Weizenbaum created Eliza in the 60s, after all, but I guess I am motivated by it because to some extent I see "conversation" as a kind of (unattainable) ideal of interactivity. [3]

**JC:** Are you therefore looking for some of the same concepts and actions that drive much of new media art to inform and expand upon new museological education tools and programs? (IOW, it's not just a new-fangled audio guide or wall text in techno fonts?)

**SD:** Yes! This is a whole other soap box, but it is demonstrably true that new media artistic practice that is (sometimes) initially seen as "far out" often becomes mainstream practice. This is not a question of artists as researchers, exactly, but it is how efforts percolate, and we are always interested in these boundary-crossing possibilities.

**JC:** If so, can you think of some other examples of educational tools that have made this connection or artworks that have brought these ideas to light?

**SD:** I have a whole list, but just start with [Antonio] Muntadas's File Room project. The idea of viewer participation in museum information is becoming increasingly important. [4]

**JC:** After all this time and development, we've seen interest in new media art by the major institutions in the US wax and wane, wax and wane. What do you think lies ahead? Are you running out of patience or are you satisfied with the way things are heading?

**SD:** Never satisfied. Frankly, I don't think any major U.S. institutions have done a particularly good job to date, but as long as artists continue to work with new media, it will become part of the institutional agenda. The important question is which will change more, institutional practice or artistic practice.

## Footnotes:

[1] http://www.walkerart.org/gallery9/beyondinterface
[2] For more information about the proposal, visit http://www.arcspace.com/architects/DillerScofidio/eyebeam/

[3] In 1966, Joseph Weizenbaum created Eliza, a program that emulates (arguably, crudely) a chat with a phychotherapist. Chris Fahey's "ada1852" emulates a conversation with Ada Lovelace, who is credited as the first computer programmer and worked with the engineer Charles Babbage, developer of the idea of the "Analytical Engine" in 1834. "ada1852" serves as an interface toRhizome.org's ArtBase, an online archive of Internet-based artworks and was commissioned as part of Rhizome's alt.interface program in 2002.
[4] Recently, the Walker has commissioned a "telematic table" by an artist-led group--Marek Walczak, Michael McAllister, Jakub Segen, Peter Kennard--which will have an informatics function in the new building. http://www.archimuse.com/mw2003/papers/dietz/dietz.html
(All photos, Patrick Lichty)