

editorial

Dark Times for New Media?
By Patrick Lichty

In May 2003, the Walker Art Center announced that in spite of its 90-million dollar expansion programs, slightly over \$1 million in payroll was slated to be cut, including the office of New Media Initiatives curator Steve Dietz. Since his time of coming to the Walker from the Smithsonian just under ten years ago, Steve has been a driving force behind the recognition of new media, and particularly net art, as a vital component of the international art scene. To list his many accomplishments is unnecessary, as Dietz' career is not germane to the point I'm seeking to address here, but a symptom in a larger issue.

My question, more succinctly put, relates to the role of new media art in the cultural milieu, and the degree of institutional support and legitimacy that will surround it in coming times. It appears that academia has embraced new media with open arms, with numerous programs at undergraduate, MFA and Ph.D. levels around the globe. Admittedly, new media has not overtaken traditionalism, which is not the goal, and some programs are rooted in commercial pursuits, but the technological arts seem to have a firm foothold in the cultural niche of education and research. It appears that as far as higher education is concerned, new media is alive and well.

However, the museum is having a much harder time coming to terms with the genre. There are many issues with which one could grapple in regards to curatorial practice, archival, access, pedagogy, social engagement, and so on that could take an entire volume to cover. It is clear that new media presents many challenges to the museum, a traditionally materialist institution, as much of the work is inherently dependent on technology, and frequently ephemeral. Although this is not completely at odds with the social experiment of the museum, in the fin de millennium era of hypercapitalism, challenges for maintenance and modification can problematize the sustainability of the genre.

Some of these macroscopic problems, at least framed more closely under US and to some extent North American culture, can be seen through events such as the Walker layoff. Can it be said that Dietz' lay-off is indicative of the proverbial collapse of the sky for new media? Of course not, but it is a clear indicator of extant trends. For example, to the best of my knowledge, there is not one full-time museum curator on the North American continent (and very few elsewhere) whose position is dedicated to the development of new media, or possibly even electronic art in particular. There may be curators who are aware and concerned with new media, but none have positions dedicated to new media and technological genres. In addition, when the time to select works within their own field for major exhibitions comes, these part-time (or as the Japanese would put it, 'arbeit') curators sometimes do not even participate, with the directors often putting that task to film/video curators. I find this more than a little offensive, and, without contextualizing specific instances in terms of a given institution's politics at a given time, one can see such practices as a cause for concern.



Secondly, when a particular field of artistic endeavor is emergent, it is often placed at the bottom of the totem pole. And, to extend that metaphor, it experiences the institutional pressures of all the previous genres before it. Taken in context with the current failing economy, this equates to dwindling resources available to artists. At the top of the food chain, many artists who were all but guaranteed a couple of grants or commissions a year are now looking for conventional jobs. That leaves almost everyone else to consider Jon Ippolito's musings on the 'gift economy.' In lean times, the most recent and least legitimized forms are often pressured by the more formalized disciplines, which sometimes squeeze them out. A parallel could be drawn to the difficulties experienced by the formalization of video art, but the matrix of circumstances during that period was somewhat different, and is rather tangential to this conversation.

To consider the compensation of the more established new media artists does not suggest that I have become entirely mercenary in my views toward the new media art community, as such is not the case. I realize that many of us in new media practice are largely unpaid, but in order to build the genre, some investiture in facilities and practitioners is essential for expansion of the cultural infrastructure. As I have mentioned, this appears to be happening in academia, but new media as a movement requires all aspects of cultural engagement to solidify the movement. These practitioners include curators, historians, gallerists, journalists, consultants, researchers, theorists, writers, and of course -- artists. To keep the new media art ecosystem sustainable and lively, it will take many things, from the sense of commitment that is obvious within new media, to sustaining support.

My contention is that what is happening to new media is indicative of a larger assault on cultural structures, creating reinscriptions into conservative forms, which is logical given the current social environment in 2003. But conversely, it appears that, as societal trends operate in a cyclical fashion, in this 'dark night of the soul' for new media (if this is truly what we are entering), one can see the seeds of a balancing within culture to the potential for a progressive backlash in the coming years not seen since the Kennedy administration.

But that will take time.

The question that comes to mind relates to what possibilities exist in the latter half of 2003. I was almost going to say 'opportunities,' but I find it repugnant to place all aspects of life under the sunny doublespeak of corporate culture, so therefore I will speak in optimistic, yet pragmatic terms. Suffice it to say, maintaining pressure on institutions through correspondence and media is essential, and the grass-roots nature of new media seen in the 90s is probably one of the movement's greatest strengths. When taken in combination with the cultural effects of social asymmetry and distribution that have become more obvious in the 00s, there is still a lot of strength left in reserve, even if the community is not so flush with the capital (personal or otherwise) of the dot.com boom. The largesse of the new media community is great; it is this in conjunction with its amiable, yet aggressive spirit that makes me have great hope. I guess the quote that comes to mind is one by Benjamin Franklin, "We must indeed all hang together, or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately." Perhaps this is far too strident for the current situation, but it does impart a measure of truth.

What is evident here is that while the institution is important for the further legitimization of the new media art form, the larger community of artists and other practitioners is in a unique position to maintain a dialogue while remaining independent. Also, the contentious but loosely cohesive nature of the community in the 90s, if enough of it still exists, can be a powerful energizer for new media. It is my hope that the amazingly supportive atmosphere that I have experienced in the tech art community will serve as a bridge to the next cycle. In short, it is my hope that the community sees fit to try to hang together and help its members through promoting its own interests, however disparate.

Before I end this, I would like to make a brief mention that at the time of this writing, letters containing nearly 700 signatures have arrived on the desk of Kathy Halbreich at the Walker regarding Dietz' dismissal, and this epitomizes the sort of supportive atmosphere of which I speak. Perhaps at the time of publication Steve will have either retained his position, found a better one, or will be the Arts Editor for the Utne Reader (a little Minnesota humor), only time will tell. But the important aspect here is not only Dietz and his termination. The fact is, his dismissal is a signifier of a larger systemic malaise, but the new media community at large may have some mobility in it yet and tends to watch the backs of its own.

This gives me some hope.
So let's get to it.