

Interzone – media arts in Australia

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Interactivity and media arts is at the core of this survey of the last fifteen years of creativeness in Australia. Why Australia? As early adopters of new technologies, the country can be regarded as a microcosm of the wider international scene, with the five main cities dispersed across a continent the size of the US, with communication as between countries, via airlines and online. Introducing the computer and its various applications to the arts scene was bootstrapped with the hosting of TISEA (Third International Symposium of Electronic Art) in Sydney in 1992 — listed in the Timeline context section of the book — and the author Darren Tofts picks up creative developments from around then until 2005. The plethora of full colour images that spill from the superbly designed square format pages are matched in intensity by the vivacity of his commentary.

In an opening section the ground is debated — what are the terms we use so blithely? How do they lead us into an area about which practitioners and the audiences who have followed them are familiar, but about which a new generation are mostly ignorant? In recuperating the recent past the opportunities presented by the convergence of the computer and media are sharpened. Dispensing with many of the accumulated working terms we are focussed upon the artefacts of Interactive Media Arts with clear and weighted prose of a high order, without jargon or glib references to fashionable writers. The tiny Endnotes/bibliography indicates intent — *Interzone* is not for the well-read academic or well-travelled curator, they can hone their needs from other tomes and reference works, such as Stephen Wilson's encyclopedic *Information Arts*. This is for the audiences, the visitors to interactive media spaces, the practitioners new to the scene, who seek some guidance and analysis, some clear and stimulating perspectives on outcomes. If the appetites are whetted, then there is no shortage of bibliographies elsewhere from which to proceed, including Tofts' earlier books.

Spectatorship is redefined by the three 'i's — interaction, interface and immersion. It leads into other chapter headings which cover: precursors and visionaries; abstraction of the virtual; artificial nature; and story spaces. Each commences with a cogent summary of the central issues and questions, filled

out and developed through the work of selected artists in the field. Advice is proffered in one or two paragraphs length on each of the highlighted works. We track the authors responses and reactive thought processes as he, as we, play co-respondent to the artwork, the initiating respondent in the dance of making the work, each distinctive by form, different by contention.

Work in the performance area and the biological receives brief mention. Inevitably too, of the practitioners selected, there will be in the mind of each informed reader, those few omitted. This reflects the complexity of compilation and the difficulty for the author, though committed engagement is clear, to attend all the exhibitions mounted throughout the period.

The overview however, reveals a distinctive pre-occupation with issues of representation from amongst the artefacts arraigned. This is less to do with the antipodal distance from the larger audiences in Europe and North America as much of the work has been seen internationally. But it indicates that most practitioners, as overseas, have either migrated from the visual and media arts or been trained into the interactive media arts by earlier migrants. (Most of the artists have close involvement with teaching.) In the current climate of cross-disciplinary collaboration, *Interzone* critically examines the artefacts and some of the processes emergent from these traditional structures.

The book whilst aiding and enlivening seminar and coffee culture discussion, could undeniably become the final visible repository of many of the works it features. The ephemerality of chip and operating systems mutating annually frustrates the interactive media artwork from becoming preserved by the active collector or museum, engineering the ephemeral beyond the claims of earlier generations of now well-collected artists. As a milestone, *Interzone* is placed to anticipate fresh directions, the liminal, already evident, for computer-mediated art activity.

The activity that produced the artefacts in the book is implied, even more so, the social structures from which it emerges. In Australia, as in Europe, investment of funding by the state encourages, if not supports, practitioner-based activity. This affects outcomes for audiences as surely as the medium with which the artist is working. One of the several ex-pat Australians referred to in the book, McKenzie Wark now resident in New York City, memorably described once the whole apparatus of cultural production across myriad artforms by tying in practitioners, curators, theorists, teachers, managers etc with studios, venues, marketing, distribution, government funding etc, which together produces one big distinctively Australian art work. A commentary indeed on the complexity of *the* culture, we can but keep focussed, as practitioners, as audience and as commentators.

With some official encouragement artists have begun to seek the scientists and technologists wishing to collaborate committedly on projects of mutual benefit. The arena of audience involvement with art will likewise shift and mutate into an interzone that creates human computer interaction of a different order, between respondent and correspondent. The role of initiator and auteur in becoming less dominant, less in charge of how an interactive

encounter may proceed. By bundling and linking a variety of electronic and microprocessor devices, this moves the art activity decidedly away from the geographically installed and hard-wired artefact towards systems and processes that are definable, more mobile and harder to classify within the taxonomies of art and social behaviour.

Tofts is well placed as an observer and commentator on the national and international scene, having consistently written about the artwork emergent and its issues in the local press, and having also jointly edited for MIT Press, *Pre-figuring Cyberculture – an intellectual history*. Previously authoring the excellent pre-history of cyberculture, *Memory Trade*, his conclusion to *Interzone* looks to the future: “..the challenge is to amplify the visible and sonic presence of media art in the ambience otherwise known as culture.”