

The previous chapters have defined the media arts, described their development, and discussed how they differ both from each other and from other art forms. In this final chapter, we assess the overall state of the media arts today, identify some of the major challenges facing the media arts, and suggest some steps that might be taken to meet these challenges.

THE MEDIA ARTS TODAY

We do not possess enough empirical data to draw a definitive picture of the media arts. Nevertheless, available information suggests that any such assessment would likely yield a mixed picture. In some respects, the media arts are clearly thriving; in others, the picture is less positive. The discussion that follows presents our views of the current state of the media arts. We begin by highlighting the most positive features and then discuss more problematic features.

From an artistic perspective, the media arts are flourishing. During the past decade there has been a proliferation of new ideas, new formats, and new work. In addition, the continued development and application of digital technology to the arts is allowing artists to integrate text, photography, video, graphics, and sound in entirely new ways, creating a whole new aesthetic in the process (Manovich, 2001a). Digital technology has opened up the possibilities of restoring and retrieving significant works from the past by converting them into digital form. It has also made possible new art forms like web art and interactive narrative, documentary, and experimental art, whose implications are being felt not only in the media arts but throughout the arts world (Landi, 1997). Indeed, the process of experimentation that has always been a feature of the media arts is perhaps more apparent today than ever.

The growing number of media artists and the diversity of their backgrounds are additional evidence of the vitality of the media arts. These developments are providing the increasingly wider perspective that the media arts have long

sought. In addition, the growing number and range of collaborations between media artists and the scientific, research, and commercial sectors have greatly expanded the employment and earnings options for artists. In the process, the techniques developed in the media arts are influencing other fields like science and architecture, as well as the arts and American culture more generally (Lunenfeld, 2000a, 2000b).

The media arts are also well positioned to benefit from changes in the ways Americans are experiencing the arts and in how the arts are being distributed. The growing tendency for people to participate in the arts through the media as well as their apparent penchant for choosing leisure pursuits that they can experience when and where they want, for example, augur well for the media arts.

In addition, economic and technological trends that have made servicing specialized or niche art markets feasible should benefit the media arts, which have traditionally been regarded as better suited to specialized rather than general audiences. The proliferation of festivals at which media arts works are screened and the fact that museums are increasing their collections of installation art and are beginning to collect Internet art suggest that there is increasing interest in media arts works, including experimental works. An increasing number of independent narrative films are reaching wider audiences, and new distribution channels, e.g., microcinemas, are benefiting those that are not (Bachar and Lagos, 2001). There is also evidence that these developments have revived the market for products, e.g., short films, that are no longer distributed through traditional channels (Miller, 2000).

Although the promise of e-commerce and distribution through the Internet remains to be demonstrated conclusively, there is a growing use of the Internet for obtaining information and purchasing artistic programming. This change in behavior is increasing demand for content. The media arts are well positioned to meet this demand. In sum, the media arts, unlike the performing and visual arts, are uniquely well suited to taking advantage of expanding channels for distributing the arts, especially to specialized audiences.

In other respects, however, the picture is less rosy. Despite the increasing range of employment and earnings options, there is little firm evidence that media artists (or other artists for that matter) are better able to support themselves exclusively through their art than they have been in the past. Indeed, many of the new opportunities available for artists using digital technology involve nonartistic uses of that technology.

Moreover, the challenges both individual media artists and media arts organizations face in seeking financial support for their work appear to have increased. Government funding, especially federal funding, for the media arts

has declined. At the same time, corporate and foundation support for the arts in general has been increasingly linked to how specific arts projects serve the objectives of those organizations. Moreover, the evidence suggests that media arts organizations, given their size and the type of work they do, are at a disadvantage when competing with other arts organizations for the support available.

Indeed, it appears that media arts organizations, like other arts organizations, will increasingly look to the market and to earned income to support their activities. Because of the nature of their operations, however, they are less likely to increase admission receipts than to look to other kinds of marketing activities and fee-producing programs to supplement their budgets. Moreover, given the nature of the market for some types of media arts work, e.g., experimental work, some media artists and the organizations that support them are likely to continue to rely upon the contributions and grants on which the nonprofit sector has traditionally depended. But the type of entrepreneurial skills that are best suited for the new type of marketing may well be foreign to those media artists and administrators who still view the commercial distribution of independent films with some suspicion. Although the anticommercial sentiment that once characterized the media arts has moderated substantially, the media arts still need to develop entrepreneurial skills relevant to the current funding environment. The emergence of a new set of brokers or intermediaries, such as Creative Capital and Creative Disturbance, may, however, help supply this expertise.

In addition, although there appears to be substantial potential for audience growth for the media arts, that potential has not yet been realized. In large part, this appears to be a product of the reliance of media arts on distributors and critics who continue to play a critical role in determining how and why some art is distributed. Indeed, the very proliferation of new media art could well increase the importance of intermediaries who may either base their judgments on outdated images of what the media arts have to offer or lack the background to assess the artistic merit of the work. While the proliferation of new distribution channels can offer new ways for media artists to interact with their audiences, taking advantage of these opportunities may require a better knowledge of who those audiences are. Indeed, despite media artists' concern with increasing distribution and access to their work, the media arts community has not yet taken the initial analytical steps to develop a clear sense of its audiences, how they differ for different types of media art, or how these audiences gain access to the media arts.

CHALLENGES FACING THE MEDIA ARTS

Despite their artistic vitality and their potential to take advantage of changing audience and distribution patterns, the media arts community, like the art

world more generally, faces a series of challenges for which they may not be prepared. These challenges fall mainly into five areas: distribution, funding, understanding the public benefits of the arts, preservation, and developing a clearer identity and greater visibility for the art form.

Distribution

Media artists need to address two distributional issues. The first relates to getting more exposure to their work and broader audiences for it. The second concerns the many policy issues surrounding new distribution technologies.

Media artists, like other artists, do not generally deal directly with their audiences. Rather, they are dependent upon intermediaries both to review (and thus advertise) and to market and distribute their work. Indeed, this dependence may actually be increasing given the proliferation of new media arts works. Although new distribution channels offer opportunities for direct distribution to consumers, they will not alleviate the need to inform consumers about what is available and what the media arts have to offer. How to provide this information and improve access to the media arts will be a central challenge.

To develop audiences, the media arts field needs to consider not only new marketing and advertising strategies but also the impact of critical reviews of media arts work. For example, creative partnerships (such as *Time Out's* support of art exhibitions in New York or Target's support for public arts projects) and product placements and promotions might raise the visibility of the media arts, particularly with younger audiences. With regard to criticism and reviews of the media arts in the press, one strategy might involve media arts organizations or funders finding ways to support critical writing and its dissemination.¹

In addition, how the new distribution channels and technologies will be used hinges upon the resolution of a key set of policy issues. These issues include what governmental policies will be adopted with regard to copyright protections, what business models (including the share of earnings media artists receive for their work) will be developed and applied to these new distribution channels, how the new interactive media will be marketed and distributed, whether a new, faster Internet channel will be created, and, if so, who will have access to it.²

¹We thank John Hanhardt for his comments on the role of advertising and criticism for future development of audiences.

²This new Internet channel is sometimes referred to as "Internet 2." It would presumably be much faster and more powerful than the current Internet. Who will have access to it and for what purposes are likely to be major issues in the future (NAMAC, 2000b).

How these policy questions are resolved will affect a host of private and public interests, and it is important that the perspectives and interests of media arts organizations and media artists be incorporated into these decisions. For that to occur, however, the media arts need to be recognized as having a legitimate interest in the debate. This, in turn, will require the media arts community to be better organized, to develop a position on these issues, and to make the public and decisionmakers aware of the important role the media arts play in the development and use of these technologies.

Funding

The challenge of dealing with the current funding predicament in the media arts will require not just increased funding but also diversification of funding sources. Diversification is important both to avoid problems from a sudden drop from a particular source (e.g., NEA support for the media arts in 1997) and because some funding sources are better suited to specific branches of the media arts. For example, experimental works are less apt to be supported by admissions receipts than narrative work. New media art may be able to tap into funding for emerging technologies that, say, video art might not. A key challenge is to recognize that the multifaceted approach media artists have already pursued may involve an even wider array of funding sources and strategies.

A prerequisite for such an approach is the need for people in the media arts community to view financial support not simply in terms of its impact on media artists and arts organizations but, just as important, in terms of how their art promotes the public interest and accords with the objectives of the diverse array of potential funders.

Public Benefits

This prerequisite raises a third issue for the media arts. In an increasingly competitive funding environment, both public and private funders have become more concerned with the public purposes of the arts. In their funding strategies, for example, governments and foundations have focused increasing attention on promoting the public benefits of the arts (American Assembly, 1997; Cherbo and Wyszomirski, 2000). As we have noted elsewhere (McCarthy et al., 2001), the arts can support the public interest by

- providing entertainment, enrichment, and fulfillment for individuals
- serving as a vehicle for the preservation and transmission of culture
- providing a variety of instrumental benefits for society at the individual, community, and national levels.

The media arts community needs to articulate how it supports these goals. In considering individual-level benefits, it needs to consider not just the number but also the range of individuals who benefit. Given media arts organizations' traditional focus on expanding the diversity of perspectives they represent, this is a goal with which many are already familiar. The latter two goals, however, appear to have received more attention from the media arts community abroad than in the United States.

In particular, those in the field should explicitly consider not just the intrinsic value of the media arts but also their instrumental or indirect benefits.³ At the individual level, for example, the media arts may promote an openness to new ideas and creativity as well as competency at school and work. At the community level, they can provide a variety of social and economic benefits, such as increasing the level of economic activity, serving as sources of innovation, and supporting the development of creative industries. At the national level, they can promote an understanding of diversity and pluralism and provide a source of the nation's exports. Moreover, they have played and continue to play a central role in American culture. By demonstrating and documenting how the media arts promote such benefits to the wider community, those in the field can make a stronger case for financial support.

In contrast, corporate supporters of the arts are often most interested in how their funding connects with their business plans. This means that corporations focus not necessarily on how such funding affects their bottom line but rather on how it relates to their image within the community, improves their ability to connect with particular market segments or populations, promotes the livability of communities, or enhances the development of new products (Cobb, 1996). The increasing range of collaboration between media artists, especially digital artists, and the corporate sector, as well as the emergence of institutions that broker between media artists and business, may enhance the opportunities for the media arts in this sector. In these activities, the media arts in the United States could benefit from the example of their counterparts abroad.

Individual contributions are the fastest growing source of support for the arts. Increasingly, however, that support comes not from a few major patrons of the arts but from an expanding number of individuals who give smaller amounts to the specific institutions with which they are involved. The keys here are likely to be broadening the range of participants who are involved in their activities and developing relationships between media arts organizations and their audiences. Given the increasing interest in "hands-on" participation among Ameri-

³This assertion is not meant to deny or demean the value of art for art's sake. Rather, it is based on our belief that these indirect effects are of considerable importance to the behavior of individuals and institutions the media arts would like to influence.

cans and the robust growth of the volunteer arts sector (McCarthy et al., 2001), this is an area to which those involved in the media arts might give more attention—particularly given the increasing importance that information technologies are playing in contemporary arts and culture.

Preservation and Technical Obsolescence

Given the importance of experimentation in the media arts and their rapid adoption of technological innovation, as well as use of ephemeral media (e.g., videotape, interactive Internet art), a major issue for the media arts, unlike the other arts, is how to preserve works done using formats, equipment, and computer code that may no longer be available. Access to earlier work in the media arts is not simply of historical interest since, as we noted above, the preservation and transmission of culture is one of the key ways in which art serves the public interest. Moreover, access to some work, such as video art, undermines preservation efforts—in the words of one museum director with a large video art collection, “The more you look at it, the more it goes away.”⁴ For some net art pieces that exist in a dynamic form, changing from moment to moment based on interactions with users or other data sources, the issue is what to preserve. For example, the Guggenheim’s acquisition of several digital art works involves not only collecting the code but also daily archiving of all site data.⁵

Increased Visibility

Finally, one of the major challenges facing the media arts is their lack of visibility. The media arts literature, for example, devotes more attention to the individual media (film, video, and computers) used in the production of the media arts than to the media arts as a distinct art form. Indeed, there is considerable dispute among media artists as to how to define and label the media arts (Jennings, 2000). Moreover, there does not seem to be an agreed-upon vocabulary for describing the field. While this situation may be understandable for an art form still in its youth, its consequences may not be benign. Without a sense of the media arts as a distinctive genre, for example, arts funders may be less likely to provide funding programs for media artists and media arts organizations. Similarly, the public—both as consumers and as potential contributors—will be less aware of the media arts. As we noted earlier, NAMAC’s strategic plan has explicitly recognized the importance of this challenge.

⁴Nelson, interview at Long Beach Museum of Art, June 26, 2002. His reference is to the fragility of the original videotapes, which increases as they age and are used.

⁵Mirapaul (2002).

RECOMMENDATIONS

It may not be surprising—given the media arts' youth, their tendency to incorporate changing technology, and the rapidly changing nature of artists' practices—that our assessment of the strengths of the media arts emphasizes their artistic vibrancy and their potential to benefit from changes in demand associated with technological changes in the distribution of the arts.

Nor, in contrast, is it surprising that our assessment of their weaknesses focuses on issues relating to the media arts' organization and public visibility. For example, we have repeatedly noted that the media arts lack a clear identity as a distinctive art form—a finding that is reflected in the literature, which emphasizes individual artistic practice rather than those elements that are common to the media arts as a whole. It is also reflected in the fact that media artists often cannot agree on how to label themselves or how to define the media arts. Finally, it is reflected in what we believe is a lack of public understanding of what the media arts are and how they differ from the products of other organizations and individuals who work with film, video, and computers.

We believe this lack of clarity makes it more difficult for the media arts to surmount the challenges of a changing arts environment. In the discussion below, we highlight four steps those in the media arts might take to deal with these issues.

1. The media arts community needs to develop a clearer sense of identity if it believes, as we do, that the media arts represent more than simply the sum of their individual parts. Developing this identity will require a clearer vocabulary for defining and describing the media arts to those outside the field. This, in turn, will first require media artists and media arts organizations to agree on these issues. Those in the field also need to promote a clearer public understanding of what the media arts are and how media artists differ from their commercial counterparts who work with film, video, and computers. Although these distinctions may be self-evident to the media arts community, it is not clear they are to others.
2. The media arts community needs to be more attuned and responsive to the policy context in which it operates. In other words, it needs to take an active role in public debates about the regulatory issues that will govern the use of technology in providing arts and entertainment and to devote more explicit attention to the public benefits the media arts provide. Documenting these benefits and showing how limited access to the media arts affects these public benefits will not only provide a stronger rationale for support of the media arts but will also increase their public visibility.

3. Media artists and organizations should attempt to broaden public involvement in their activities. This includes broadening and diversifying the audiences for the media arts but certainly should not be limited to those activities. As we have noted elsewhere (McCarthy and Jinnett, 2001), arts organizations have multiple missions, and the priority they assign to the various missions differs.⁶ Media arts organizations need to consider how to increase public participation in terms of their own missions and goals. This will require them to select their target audiences and collect information about them. Using good information about these potential audiences, they can then develop tactics to engage them. Knowing something about potential participants' levels of interest toward the arts and the kinds of art they are interested in; their lifestyles, information channels, and resources; and the kinds of benefits (individual and social) they are seeking will help artists and organizations design effective tactics to reach them (McCarthy and Jinnett, 2001). However, such information does not currently exist and most organizations do not have the capacity to collect it. Media arts funders might assist by requiring audience information in their grantmaking criteria or by funding arts organizations or others to develop these capabilities.
4. Finally, the media arts community needs to address the lack of systematic information about the field as a whole—not only about audiences, but also about artists, organizations, and funding.⁷ The challenges in collecting such information are significant and are intertwined with several other challenges facing the field. The lack of a common understanding and definition of the media arts, for example, poses problems for information collection efforts. In addition, the current funding climate makes it less likely that scarce resources will be devoted to meeting these information needs. But the absence of information on the media arts complicates efforts to understand how they operate and increases the chances that decisions about the various issues and challenges facing the media arts will be based on incomplete or erroneous information.

⁶Our earlier work identified, for example, at least three different purposes of arts organizations: promoting the canons of specific art forms, focusing on serving specific communities of interest, and promoting creativity. Although these goals are certainly not mutually exclusive, most of the organizations we are familiar with have tended to assign their highest priority to one of these goals.

⁷Once again, NAMAC's explicit attention to these information issues is a step in the right direction.