

The previous two chapters have described the changing structure of the arts world in America and the diversity of approaches that have characterized the media arts throughout their development. This chapter compares the media arts with the other arts and examines differences among the media arts in greater detail. These comparisons are structured according to the analytical framework from our performing arts analysis: audiences, artists, organizations, and funding. In drawing comparisons among the media arts, we primarily distinguish among different types of work in terms of their function (narrative, documentary, and experimental) rather than the media used or the specific style of the artwork.

As we noted in our description of information available on the media arts, the absence of empirical data on their organizational characteristics presents a major challenge for a systematic comparison of audiences, artists, organizations, and funding and how they vary among the media arts. Consequently, in the comparisons below, we draw heavily on qualitative findings from the media arts literature and the interviews we conducted with individuals in the field.

## **AUDIENCES**

Gaining access to wider audiences has been an ongoing objective for the media arts.<sup>1</sup> But as we noted earlier, patterns of participation in the arts have been changing. In particular, we highlighted three related changes: First, the arts face increasing competition for individuals' leisure time. Second, the forms of individuals' participation in the arts are changing as more people participate through the media or in a direct "hands-on" fashion while rates of attendance at live performances remain stable. Finally, these changes are affecting not only how people become involved in the arts but also which art they choose. In this chapter, we examine whether these trends will affect the media arts in the same

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<sup>1</sup>See our earlier discussion of AIVF and the emergence of the media arts movement.

ways as they do the other arts and whether these effects are likely to vary among the media arts.

### **Technology Is Changing Arts Participation**

As we indicated in our earlier discussion of the changing arts environment, these trends are related to shifts in Americans' leisure patterns and to technological developments that, in principle, should be conducive to expanding audiences for the media arts. As leisure time has become more fragmented, for example, Americans are choosing forms of arts participation that they can tailor to their own schedules and interests. These choices favor activities that individuals can enjoy at home and according to their schedules and interests—traits that are more characteristic of the media arts than of the performing or visual arts. In addition, increasing public use of computers for leisure time activities—from games to web surfing—should increase participation in computer-related forms of the media arts. Computers can provide opportunities for “amateurs” to become directly involved in creating art and can expose a growing pool of potential consumers to the arts, possibly including many who do not already participate.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, improvements in reproduction and transmission technologies have made it easier for individuals to enjoy the kinds of art they want, when they want, and where they want. These trends are advantageous for the media arts, which are on the cutting edge of such technologies. The reproducibility and portability of film and video work, for example, make them well suited to home viewing through videocassettes (Walker and Klady, 1986) and, more recently, DVDs.

Similarly, the production and distribution of art using computer technology—which the media arts have been quick to adopt—provide consumers with considerable flexibility in choosing the type of art they want to experience and how they have access to it. The Internet, for example, allows consumers to gain access to recent work regardless of where they live and to do so more rapidly than if they had to rely on traditional distribution sources. Moreover, as Miller has pointed out, it has opened up new markets for media arts products, e.g., short films, which had been all but abandoned by mainstream theaters and

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<sup>2</sup>As Jon Ippolito has suggested, more people may surf prominent Internet art sites than attend museums. Indeed, he says that by separating art from the established art circles and venues, art available on the Internet is likely to reach a very different (and larger) population (Ippolito, <http://www.guggenheim.org/internetart/welcome.html>).

broadcasters (Miller, 2000).<sup>3</sup> Finally, by allowing direct interchanges between artists and consumers as well as among consumers who might share an interest in particular forms of media art, it provides a channel for exchanging information about new work.<sup>4</sup>

Whether this new flexibility actually translates into increased access and expanding audiences, however, may well vary for different types of media art because individual consumption is predicated on awareness and interest in various types of art. Our work on the performing arts suggests, for example, that there are significant differences in marketing strategies and budgets between work that is thought to appeal to broad cross-sections of the population and work that is believed to appeal to more specialized or niche audiences. Work thought to have general audience appeal can attract commercial distributors who might invest the resources necessary to market and distribute it widely. Such work typically gains access to wider audiences and, in return, generates higher revenues. Work thought to appeal to more specialized audiences, on the other hand, tends, if it is distributed or exhibited at all, to be relegated to smaller distributors or exhibitors who, with fewer resources to invest in marketing, tend to focus on niche markets.

The behavior of distributors is likely to be especially important in the media arts for three reasons. First, given the tradition of experimentation and innovation, much media arts work may be viewed as more likely to appeal to specialized audiences.<sup>5</sup> Second, many, if not most media artists, are unaffiliated with established media or commercial organizations and thus must rely on critics and other intermediaries to be recognized and marketed. Third, as media arts work and the number of media artists has proliferated, the probability of any individual work or artist getting recognized will increasingly depend upon how the work is marketed and distributed.

Clearly then, decisions about the potential audience for media arts work play a central role in determining how it is marketed and, thus, who has access to it. Often these decisions appear to be based less on the artistic quality of the work than on a host of other factors, such as content, format, and audience accessibility (Gilmore, 2001). Work that is deemed controversial, whose format or pro-

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<sup>3</sup>As Miller puts it, “entrepreneurs have turned to shorts because they can be acquired cheaply, delivered swiftly to consumers with PCs hooked up to high-speed lines, and watched in a few idle moments from almost any den, dorm room, or cubicle” (Miller, 2000, p. 4).

<sup>4</sup>This type of information exchange appears to have played a major role in the commercial success of the 1999 independent film “The Blair Witch Project.”

<sup>5</sup>However, presenting media art may also pose special technological challenges, such as working with obsolete technology (e.g., programming languages, operating systems, hardware) or ephemeral art work (some video art and web art) or particularly complex technologies (types of projectors, computer hardware, plasma screens, etc.).

duction quality is not suited to standard theatrical release or broadcast, or that is judged to be less accessible for broad-based audiences is relegated to limited distribution—when it is distributed at all.

### **Audiences Differ for Different Types of Media Art**

**Narrative Work.** For a variety of reasons, many of the media arts are relegated more to niche than to broad-based audiences. The principal exception to this seems to be narrative works. Since two-thirds of Americans attend films annually and over 90 percent watch television, the potential market for narrative works of media art appears to be quite large. Indeed, the growing commercial success of selected independent narrative films during the past two decades testifies to the potential market at least for selected narrative films (*American Cinematographer*, 1996).<sup>6</sup>

However, a major issue in defining the market for independent narrative work is the ambivalence with which some media artists view commercial distribution and success. This issue is underscored by the sharp distinction often drawn by media artists between commercial, i.e., studio, and independent narrative films. The tremendous commercial success of some independent narrative films during the past decade has, for example, spawned increasing criticism that these works are not really “independent.” Geoffrey Gilmore, co-director of the Sundance Film Festival, argues in response that this criticism confuses commercial success (and thus broad audience appeal) with formulaic market-driven work (Gilmore, 2001). While acknowledging that independent films are difficult to define, Gilmore suggests that the key to the distinction between studio and independent work should rest with the subject matter, creativity, and independence of the work—not with its production budget or commercial success.

Another approach to the definition of independent work has been suggested by Lars von Trier’s Dogme95 Manifesto, which lays out a series of rules that should govern the production of an independent film. Whether the rules embodied in the Dogme95 Manifesto represent a blueprint of independence or an aesthetic protest against slick Hollywood productions is unclear (Roxborough, 2002).

Still another approach argues that independence describes the filmmaker’s control over the creative process. If the filmmaker does not control the writing, filming, editing, etc., the film is not independent. Differences of opinion about what constitutes an independent film are apparent in the many criteria for

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<sup>6</sup>Interactive narrative work may represent an exception to this statement because it seems better suited for distribution to individual users.

selection by various independent film festivals around the world. But the relationship between independent work and how that work is distributed directly affects who has access to it.

In any case, as Gilmore has noted, of the 1,000 independent films (by his definition) that have been produced in each of the past three years, only 75 to 100 have had any kind of theatrical release. Indeed, it appears that independent narrative works can be divided into those that cross over into the commercial sphere (and are thus given relatively wide marketing and distribution) and those that are relegated to the network of informal and independent distribution channels that has come to be called the “microcinema” movement. This phenomenon refers to alternative venues and cinemas (often at mobile or temporary locations) that present short and feature-length films that fall under the “cultural radar” of mainstream movie theaters and/or art house cinemas.<sup>7</sup> In any case, despite the size of the potential market and the success of individual narrative works and artists, most narrative work receives very limited distribution and thus remains unseen or seen only in niche markets.

**Documentary Work.** In contrast to the potential popular appeal of narrative work, documentary work has historically had a more difficult time appealing to broad-based audiences. Boyle’s brief history of the documentary suggests that, despite the success of individual documentary works and artists and the increased funding associated with local programming requirements for public television, the history of the documentary form in America is one of struggle for “air time” (Boyle, 1990). Boyle attributes this situation to a variety of factors. Many documentary artists, for example, focus on explicitly political themes designed to challenge the established political and social order. While consistent with the media arts’ iconoclastic tradition, this practice limits their appeal to some distributors. Others have criticized documentary work as being of uneven production quality and in formats and lengths not suited for broadcast or theatrical showings. In addition, the often intensely personal and community-specific topics of documentary work may limit their appeal to broad-based audiences (Aufderheide, 1997; Feaster, 1998). Finally, for whatever reasons, commercial and public broadcasting as well as film distributors appear increasingly reluctant to air documentary work in general.

This reluctance to air documentary work may be changing since Boyle published in 1990, now that cable channels, such as A&E, the History Channel,

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<sup>7</sup>In some respects the microcinema movement calls to mind the Film-makers Cooperative that was founded by Jonas Mekas in 1962. As Renan describes it, “the Film-makers Cooperative adopted a policy of distributing all films submitted to it . . . this was in line with the attitude that it was the film artist who knew what ought to be seen, not the distributors, not the exhibitors, and not the audience. Following this idea, a series of film showcases, operated by the filmmakers, were set up to insure minimal exhibition (Renan, 1967, p. 101). See also Bachar and Lagos (2001).

Oxygen, etc., are looking for and funding documentaries. But the future remains uncertain. Earlier expectations of wider market distribution in response to increased public funding in the 1970s failed to materialize despite the fact that, as Boyle points out, many of the techniques developed by alternative TV documentarians were subsequently adopted by established media. Without broader distribution, including support for marketing through the Internet and other new distribution channels, the market for documentary work will likely remain principally a specialized one.

**Experimental Work.** Given its conceptual focus and its innovative nature, it is not surprising that experimental work appears to have its greatest appeal in more specialized or niche audiences. After all, judgments about the size of potential audiences appear to be the key determinant in decisions about distribution, and the leisure literature suggests that innovative art, like the more technical aspects of most leisure activities, is likely to appeal only to audiences already knowledgeable about the arts. In the case of experimental work, this is likely to mean other artists, art aficionados, and art critics (Kelly and Freysinger, 2000).

Media artists creating installation pieces, for example, found it difficult to get critics and collectors to accept the new art form, even after museums and galleries began exhibiting it. Experimental or avant-garde films and videos have also traditionally had a difficult time finding venues (Renan, 1967). Similarly, interactive arts, such as Internet art or installation pieces that require interaction with audiences, may make such work inaccessible to broad-based audiences. Moreover, the fact that many experimental pieces were purposely designed to be ephemeral—in reaction to the view of art as a commodity—has no doubt contributed to this pattern (Lovejoy, 1992). On the other hand, as Ippolito has pointed out, some forms of experimental work are well suited to distribution over the Internet and can thus reach audiences they otherwise would not. Finally, some emerging forms of experimental art, e.g., art created by “cultural hackers,” are designed to undermine traditional distribution channels and will likely have limited distribution (Rockefeller Foundation, 2001).

Given this situation, it may be unrealistic to expect experimental work to appeal to the market and be supported by it. Instead, a more apt model for the experimental media arts may be the sciences, where scientists, typically working at universities, perform basic research with subsidies from the public and private sectors. The private sector may further support such research after the applicability of the basic concepts has been demonstrated and a market established. Indeed, as we discuss shortly, media artists are increasingly collaborating with researchers and scientists both in universities and in the corporate sector. However, to develop this model, the media arts must continue to be open to

such collaborations and to promote greater understanding of its relevance to these sectors, as the media arts are doing internationally.

In sum, despite the fact that at least certain types of media art would seem to have a potential appeal to a wider audience, a combination of factors, including the behavior and beliefs of distributors, lack of audience familiarity with the art form, and the ambivalence of some media artists themselves toward commercial involvement, appears to have limited audience access to much of the media arts. As we discuss presently, these factors have direct implications for media artists and the channels through which the media arts are distributed.

## ARTISTS

The size and range of the audience for the media arts affect not only who has access but also the ability of media artists to make a living from their art. This issue is a central theme for performing and visual artists as well (Alper and Wassal, 2000; Kreidler, 1996; NEA, 1982). In our discussion of the arts environment in Chapter Two, we highlighted three aspects of the labor market for artists and how it has been changing. First, we noted that artists face a more challenging labor market than other professionals. Second, as a result, most artists struggle to make a living in their chosen profession and typically must supplement their income as an artists with other sources of income. Finally, the number of artists has been increasing despite this situation. How do these trends compare with the situation in the media arts?

We lack the empirical data on media artists needed to make comparisons of the earnings and labor market conditions of media and other artists, but both the literature and our interviews suggest that the number of media artists has been increasing and that several factors have contributed to this trend. First, although we have no reason to assume that the earnings situation of media artists is dramatically different from that of other artists, the emergence and growth of the new media arts, e.g., computer-based work, appears to have attracted large numbers of new artists to the field. Second, declines in the costs of the technology used in the media arts have made work as a media artist more affordable. Third, the growth of university film schools and media arts programs has provided entry to the field to greater numbers of potential media artists.<sup>8</sup> Finally, by reducing the traditional barriers to collaboration between the commercial and independent sectors, the new media arts have expanded the employment options of the new media artists.

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<sup>8</sup>There are now over 600 film, video, and communications schools and programs in institutions of higher education around the United States, plus close to 100 in Canada. These are in addition to the centers of commercial-based instruction, such as the Los Angeles Film School, the New York Film Academy, and the School for Film and Television.

These developments have not only increased the number of media artists, they have also expanded their diversity. As our brief history of the media arts indicates, many of the original media artists were either visual artists experimenting with film or early filmmakers exploring the new medium. As technological developments lowered the cost of film and video equipment, the number and diversity of new artists using film and video in their art increased sharply and included individuals from music and other artistic fields. The emergence of the media arts movement in the 1960s and 1970s and the subsequent appearance of regional training centers across the country in turn produced another generation of narrative and documentary film and video artists, including substantial numbers of minorities and women who viewed these technologies as providing them with an opportunity to tell their stories to wider audiences.<sup>9</sup> The ability of these media arts centers to provide an array of services to artists—training, use of equipment, support in obtaining funding and distribution—made them invaluable to many young artists (NAMAC, 2000a).<sup>10</sup>

More recently, the growth of film schools and programs in universities has dramatically increased the number of college graduates in filmmaking and other media arts careers. However, cutbacks in support for media arts centers, increasing pressures to develop work that can attract wider audiences and earnings, and the difficulty of earning a living in a field lacking broad distribution have led many of the current generation of new media artists to turn their efforts away from film and video per se to the personal computer and the new media arts.

The emergence of the computer in the new media arts appears to have had a profound effect on media artists. It has expanded the number of artists by attracting existing media artists to the computer-based arts. These artists represent not only a more diverse array of sociodemographic groups but also a wide variety of artistic and professional backgrounds. Many of the early practitioners of computer-related art, for example, were not artists at all but rather scientists who collaborated with artists in exploring the artistic uses of the computer.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>The “Third World Newsreel” provides a notable example of an organization that has played a key role in fostering the creation, appreciation, and dissemination of independent film and video by and about people of color (<http://www.twn.org>).

<sup>10</sup>Our discussion of the media arts movement and the role of regional training centers have benefited from discussions with Gail Silva, executive director of the Film Arts Foundation in San Francisco.

<sup>11</sup>Rush (2001) describes some of these initial experiments. Steve Dietz, media arts curator at the Walker Arts Center, has compiled a timeline on the new media arts that shows both the history and the wide array of participants in this area. The timeline can be accessed at <http://telematic.walkerart.org/timeline>.

The new media arts have also dramatically increased the number and range of collaborations between traditional media artists, computer programmers, scientists, and a host of others.<sup>12</sup> In the process, new media artists have become involved in a wide range of interactions between the arts and the university and scientific sectors, which have not been limited, as was true in the past, to the traditional fine arts and art history disciplines (Rockefeller Foundation, 2001). The emergence of the new media arts has also afforded opportunities to work in a wider range of production settings—ranging anywhere from hobbyists working on their home computers, to media arts professionals working with a variety of equipment, to independents collaborating with other artists and computer professionals using the latest in hardware and software (NAMAC, 2000a).

These changes have also produced a wider range of interactions between artists and industry than has traditionally been the case. As a result, the traditional distinction between the commercial for-profit sector and the noncommercial arts has begun to blur in the new media arts (Rockefeller Foundation, 2001). Many new media artists, for example, are fully employed as programmers or have helped developed commercially marketable software. They use the earnings from these commercial activities to support their art.<sup>13</sup> In addition, many media artists have begun to assume such untraditional roles as entrepreneurs and researchers (Rockefeller Foundation, 2001).<sup>14</sup> Even when these activities do not provide sufficient earnings to support such artists full-time, they provide the new media artists with a wider range of employment options (and thus higher earnings) than have traditionally been available.<sup>15</sup> However, since the commercial sector is typically less interested in the art per se than in the technology that drives the art, some have voiced concern about whether these activities will enable artists to preserve their artistic focus (Rockefeller Foundation, 2001).

In addition, new distribution technologies have opened up opportunities for media artists to bypass the various intermediaries that have traditionally controlled access to their work. Although direct distribution from artists to audi-

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<sup>12</sup>As Furlong (1983) notes, these collaborations did not begin with the new media arts. Several of the technological innovations that were instrumental in the development of video were created by individuals, like Eric Siegel and Stephen Beck, who got involved in art through their interest in technology.

<sup>13</sup>For example, John Klima, a media artist who is also a Wall Street programmer, is quoted as saying, "It takes less time to do a \$2,000 programming job than to apply for a \$2,000 grant that you might not even get" (Bodow, 2001).

<sup>14</sup>An interesting example of this phenomenon is presented in Laurel (2001).

<sup>15</sup>Although few artists of any type are able to support themselves exclusively from their art, there are major earnings difference between such artists as authors whose outside earnings are in professional occupations, e.g., teaching, and those who work in low-paid service jobs, e.g., actors who work as waiters. Media artists who are able to apply their skills in related fields, e.g., as programmers, will earn substantially more than those who do not.

ences remains more a possibility than an established reality, it could facilitate broader distribution for their work and, in the process, provide them with new earnings possibilities.

In sum, a growing number and range of collaborations between media artists and the commercial sector, combined with improvements in technology that allow artists to bypass the traditional middlemen in reaching their audiences, offer media artists a wider array of employment and earnings options than has historically been the case. However, they also raise several important issues for media artists.

First, although new collaborations with the commercial sector may provide new options, they also raise old questions about who should own the legal rights to creative intellectual property. These questions have become more prominent for the arts in general (Litman, 1996; Lessig, 2001), but they may be even more troublesome for media artists because of the complex nature of new media arts work (Gunn, 1996). Two recent laws on copyright issues are particularly germane to the media arts. The 1998 Sony Bono Copyright Extension Act, which lengthened copyright protections, could limit public access to historical works and pose a special problem for efforts to digitize and restore classic works (Albanese, 2002). The Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 places severe limits on the use of anything that circumvents digital copyright controls (Cave, 2002).<sup>16</sup> New technologies also raise new copyright issues, e.g., is the code that an artist uses to create computer art protected, like a piece of music, or is that tantamount to protecting the paint and brushes used in the visual arts?

Second, and somewhat ironically, as new work and the channels for distributing that work proliferate, artists may become increasingly dependent upon intermediaries who are needed to help overloaded audiences identify the voices they want to hear.

Third, the potential downside of more market-oriented funding is that it may change the tenor of the art itself as well as who can afford to be a media artist. If content is driven primarily by economic impulse, will the media arts experience a decline of avant-garde work for which the market is likely to remain both small and highly specialized?

Finally, these various developments in the employment opportunities available to media artists and the technology of their creation have democratized the creation of media art. This democratization is reflected in the growing number of artists, their increasingly diverse backgrounds and characteristics, and even

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<sup>16</sup>The Security Systems Standards and Certification Act, currently before Congress, would mandate the inclusion of copy-protection technology in all digital devices.

in the process of making art. Indeed, the proliferation of new artists who cross over among media and/or use a variety of media in their work, as well as the increasing tendency for media artists to work with a variety of others, is blurring the traditional distinction among disciplines and media. These trends may indicate a need to redefine what is meant by a “media artist.”

## ORGANIZATIONS

As we noted in Chapter Two, the organization of the art world is changing in multiple ways. First, the critical role of intermediaries is changing. In addition, the channels used to distribute and market the arts are shifting. Finally, the dimensions along which the arts have traditionally been classified (sector, discipline, and medium) are blurring. How are these trends affecting the media arts?

As we highlighted in our discussion of audiences, a central issue for media artists is how to get their work displayed and distributed. Complicating this process are the many intermediaries between artists and their potential audiences. For example, we have already called attention to the fact that potential distributors of the media arts typically screen narrative and documentary work to assess its audience appeal as well as its overall quality. Similarly, reviews of experimental work affect the marketability of that work. In addition to the screening process, however, artists also rely on intermediaries to help them obtain the resources to produce their work as well as to arrange the distribution, exhibition, and marketing of their finished products. Depending upon the type of work, these tasks involve a variety of different parties—from curators, critics, and independent film producers to media arts centers, foundations, and commercial interests.

Although the challenges this process presents are germane to all artists, especially those who are just starting out or those whose work is not yet recognized, they may be particularly acute for media artists, for three reasons. First, media artists are more likely to lack the institutional resources available to other artists. Second, the market for media arts work is often highly specialized and, given the rapidly changing nature of the work, not well identified or established. Finally, the distribution process itself appears to be changing.

Media artists, for example, are in many ways more like visual artists than performing artists in that they are not generally employed by organizations. Rather, they are likely to work alone or with groups assembled for a specific project. Within the film and video media, for example, narrative and documentary artists work in collaboration with other artists and production crews on individual projects. When the project is completed, the group disbands and its members move on to other work. Installation and computer artists, on the

other hand, may often work alone. As a result, media artists must assume responsibility for many of the functions that arts organizations, e.g., theater or dance companies, typically assume for performing artists. These functions include arranging financing; leasing or purchasing equipment; and arranging for the production, screening, distribution, and marketing of their work. This creates a need for collaborators and intermediaries, such as regional media arts centers, to help individual artists negotiate their way through the various steps required to create, produce, and distribute their art.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, as we have discussed above, distributors assume that most media art work appeals to specialized rather than general audiences. To break this stereotype, media art work needs to be recognized as having a broader appeal. However, as the number of media artists, art forms, and art works proliferates and the works become more diversified and specialized, this may be increasingly difficult to accomplish, for two reasons. First, as the volume and diversity of work grows, the odds against any individual artist's work getting recognized and subsequently screened or exhibited grow longer. Second, as the market becomes more segmented, it becomes more difficult to know which audiences to target and how to identify and reach them.

The pace at which new art forms and practices are proliferating may be a particular problem for the media arts because critics can be slow to accept new artistic styles. As we have already noted, it took several years after the appearance of installation art using media before critics reviewed it and museums (the principal commissioners of these pieces) began to collect it. Similarly, the first Internet-based art was only recently purchased by the Guggenheim Museum (Mirapaul, 2002). Even when a new art form with recognized promise appears (e.g., new forms of interactive narrative art in which the user/participant plays a direct role in determining how the story unfolds), it is likely to raise problems for critics, distributors, collectors, and funders who are uncertain what standards they should use to evaluate such work (Rockefeller Foundation, 2001).<sup>18</sup> This problem is further compounded by the fact that in the United States, at least, critics tend to specialize in one particular medium, discipline, or style.

Finally, the rapid proliferation of new media arts work and its changing technology of production and distribution appear to be challenging existing distri-

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<sup>17</sup>As we have noted above, these are the very artists that NAMAC and other media arts service organizations are designed to serve.

<sup>18</sup>This problem also extends to the issue of how to market such work. Consider, for example, the issue of how to market new forms of interactive art in which the user/participant plays a central role in the artistic process. Unlike most narrative or documentary work that is typically presented before a group audience, this type of work is meant to be experienced individually. Should it be marketed like a computer game—with which it shares similarities but whose content may differ greatly? Or should it be marketed like a work of fiction—which usually involves marketing the author as well?

bution models for the media arts. Typically, the distribution process for the media arts (and often other art forms as well) has at least two stages.<sup>19</sup> First, the original work is screened by critics, curators, and potential distributors, who assess its overall quality and its market potential. Second, having selected the work they will distribute, distributors then develop marketing and distribution plans to the presenters who will subsequently display the work.

Since different types of media art are typically displayed in different venues, this process tends to take different forms for different types of media art.<sup>20</sup> The screening process for narrative and documentary work often takes place at festivals designed to preview new work. Subsequently, distribution to theaters, art houses, museum and university film programs, public television, and other sites is handled by distributors who often specialize in particular kinds of venues. Installation and other forms of experimental art depend more on museum curators, art critics, and gallery owners, who are likely to conduct their own marketing programs to attract viewers (museum attendees) or buyers, as appropriate. The process differs somewhat for various forms of computer art, where the display venue is likely to be an individual's computer. Incorporating media arts into museum collections, with all the institutional, logistic, and preservation issues it entails, will be particularly challenging as computer and Internet-based art forms mature. Of course, only a small percentage of the work that is screened is actually distributed commercially.<sup>21</sup>

We lack systematic empirical information on the number and characteristics of the various organizations involved in the screening, distribution, and marketing of the media arts. But the available qualitative information suggests that the distribution process for the media arts is changing as new organizations and informal collaborations proliferate to perform many of the functions that media artists require (Rockefeller Foundation, 2001; NAMAC, 2000a, 2000b). Although these changes offer the promise of wider distribution and more opportunities for media artists to interact directly with their potential audiences, it is unclear whether this promise will be realized.

In recent years, for example, there has been a proliferation of festivals for screening new film, video, and television work. These include not only the traditional film festivals like Cannes, Sundance, Venice, Berlin, and Toronto but also such niche festivals as the British Columbia Student Film and Video Festi-

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<sup>19</sup>This is, of course, in addition to the screening of proposals by curators, potential producers (film/documentary), and other funders before a work is even produced.

<sup>20</sup>Once again, the approach in the United States contrasts with that used overseas.

<sup>21</sup>As the figures cited by Gilmore demonstrate, although the number of independent narrative films has skyrocketed over the past few decades, fewer than 10 percent of these films have received any kind of theatrical release.

val, the Austin Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, the Cracow Short Film Festival, the Hispanic Film Festival, and the Student Animation Festival of Ottawa.

In part, the rise in the number of festivals is a result of loss of support for ongoing programs and exhibitions. Arts organizations and other groups are organizing festivals to present a mix of media arts projects, including international film, video, and computer work. Because festivals have lower costs than ongoing programs and can concentrate critics and distributors in one place, they are an attractive way to bring people into a particular venue, attract new audiences, and gain the attention of critics and distributors.

In addition, prospects for broadband transmission and e-commerce may allow media artists to bypass the traditional screening and distribution process and present their work directly to consumers. But, as we have already noted, the proliferation of artists and new material can overload both artists and audiences. For artists, the challenge is how to be heard. For audiences, the challenge is how to identify and locate the material that merits their attention. A number of observers have noted, for example, that this “democratization” of the media arts, while in principle a good thing, inevitably leads to an “exponential replication of junk” (NAMAC, 2000b, p. 14).

Indeed, the democratization of the media arts may well increase the role of critics in determining which works and which artists receive recognition and thus distribution.<sup>22</sup> However, the fact that critics in the United States tend to specialize in particular media or disciplines (again to a greater extent than outside the country) may dilute this critical role.

Technology is also opening up new distribution possibilities. But it is still unclear whether the business models needed to make these technical developments financially practical have been developed, particularly in the aftermath of the collapse of the dot.com boom. Laurel (2001) discusses the challenge of developing and identifying successful business models in the media arts. Even if direct artist-to-audience distribution remains more a promise than a reality, the possibility that digital technology can lower the cost of distribution and enable commercial firms to market successfully to specialized markets has led for-profit firms to enter the market for media arts products (NAMAC, 2000b). Unlike the traditional distributors of media arts works, many of these firms have the technological know-how and, perhaps more importantly, the marketing dollars to promote wider distribution not only of new work but also of existing work that can now be converted into digital format. Indeed, the potential of marketing specialized products to narrowly targeted audiences has prompted

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<sup>22</sup>One of our reviewers, for example, suggested that foundations could play a key role in support of the media arts by supporting programs for the development of informed criticism of the media arts.

some firms to begin distributing media arts products like short films—something that was not possible through traditional marketing channels (Miller, 2000).

Once again, several issues must be resolved for the promise of these developments to be realized. First, although the entry of commercial firms into the distribution process may provide significant new resources for marketing media arts work, it is still not clear whether viable business models that will bring a return on that investment have been developed. Media arts distributors, for example, confront many of the same problems dealing with the downloading of copyrighted materials that the recording industry faced with Napster. In addition, it is unclear what marketing approach will be appropriate for interactive narrative and documentary work given its focus on the individual user.

Although for-profit firms may have the resources needed for marketing, they—unlike the traditional media arts distributors—may lack the content needed to sustain viable markets. Indeed, some observers view the competition between the resource-poor but content-rich traditional media arts distributors and the resource-rich but content-poor new commercial distributors with alarm. They are concerned both about how much of the increased spending will end up in the hands of the artists and about the effects of this competition on traditional distributors. They believe that these distributors, who have played a critical role in supplying selected, especially nonprofit, markets, must continue in this role (NAMAC, 2000b). If the traditional distributors disappear, they say, will new commercial distributors like Amazon.com fill this niche, or will the new distributors focus instead on markets that offer higher rates of return? Similar questions have arisen in the recorded music market, where independent distributors and retailers of recorded music appear to be losing out to the major record companies (Stroud, 2000).

Another promise made possible by the new technology is the conversion into the new digital format of the substantial body of existing work that was originally produced in other formats. This would not only ensure access to work that might otherwise be lost, but it could also supply content for distributors.<sup>23</sup> This conversion process, however, will require a significant investment. It is unclear whether the new commercial distributors will be willing to make this investment without first solving some of the distribution and marketing problems we have just discussed.

Although much of this discussion has focused on how technological developments will affect the supply side of the media arts market, there is also concern about what the increasing importance of computer technology will mean for

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<sup>23</sup>We return to the issue of preservation in Chapter Five.

individuals and communities without access to this technology. Given the historical concern within the media arts for providing voice to those whose stories have not been covered by the commercial film and broadcast industries, the exclusion of such groups from these new developments would be viewed as inconsistent with the media arts' roots. It would also run counter to the increasing concern within the arts community more generally with providing greater access to the arts to the public at large (American Assembly, 1997).

## FUNDING

How these distribution issues are resolved is of central importance to the media arts because they, like the arts more generally, must function within a new and more challenging funding environment. As noted in Chapter Two, individual artists are facing increasing competition for a shrinking pool of grant funds and in all likelihood will have to rely more on their earnings to support their work. Arts organizations face similar pressures to increase their earned revenues in the face of uncertain public funding and a growing tendency for corporations and foundations to channel their support for the arts through restricted categorical funding.

Although we lack solid empirical evidence of how these trends are manifest in the media arts, we have several reasons to assume that both individual media artists and media arts organizations are facing increasing financial pressures. Recent reports by the Rockefeller Foundation's Media Arts program and from the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture, for example, underscore the financial pressures the media arts are facing (Rockefeller Foundation, 2001; NAMAC, 2000b). By 1996, funding for the NEA's media arts program had plummeted over 90 percent from its peak in 1981.

A recent empirical study of arts funding in New York City is particularly useful in documenting the pressures the new environment is exerting. This study examines recent patterns of financial support in the city by arts discipline and size of organization (Alliance for the Arts, 2001). Because media arts organizations tend to be smaller than museums and performing arts organizations, these data on funding patterns by size of organization may provide special insights into the problems the media arts face.

These New York data, as well as NEA data drawn from the Census of Service Industries, suggest, for example, that visual arts organizations (in which media arts organizations are included) have traditionally been more dependent upon government grants and contributed income than have performing arts organizations (NEA, 1998). Thus, they will be more directly affected by changes in funding practices from these sources.

Furthermore, the data indicate that although large arts organizations receive the lion's share of total government funding, smaller arts organizations are much more heavily dependent upon government funds.<sup>24</sup> For example, although the largest arts organizations in New York City received over half of all the government funds distributed in the city, these funds represented less than 10 percent of their total budgets. In contrast, medium-sized and small arts organizations depended upon government support for between 20 and 28 percent of their revenues. Thus, cutbacks in government funding are likely to have a particularly dramatic effect on the operations of smaller arts organizations, including those in the media arts.<sup>25</sup> Small and medium-sized arts organizations also appear to be at a disadvantage in competing with larger organizations for corporate and individual contributions. In recent years, both corporate and individual donors have increased their contributions to large organizations in New York City while reducing them to small and medium-sized groups (Alliance for the Arts, 2001).

Visual arts organizations, as we have noted, are less reliant on earnings than are their performing arts counterparts. In large measure, this reflects the fact that admissions receipts make up a smaller portion of their total revenue. Given the fact that attendance at art museums has been rising more rapidly than attendance at live performances, this is probably due both to the unwillingness of some museums to charge admission fees and the reluctance of others that do charge to raise their admission prices.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, however, earnings from sources other than admissions, which as we have noted have been growing faster than admission receipts, are generally a more important source of revenue in the visual arts than in the performing arts (NEA, 1998b). However, the New York City data indicate that the mix of admissions receipts and other earnings varies substantially between large and small arts organizations. Specifically, large organizations' revenues are about evenly divided between admissions and other earnings, whereas medium and small arts organizations' revenues are disproportionately made up of other earnings. We do not know why this is the case, but we do know it does not bode well for media arts organizations that are not only smaller but also less well-established and much more likely to be presenting new and less well-known work.

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<sup>24</sup>Very large organizations were defined as those with over \$10 million in operating budgets, large organizations were those with budgets between \$1 million and \$10 million, medium-sized organizations had budgets of between \$100,000 and \$1 million, and small organizations had budgets of less than \$100,000 (Alliance for the Arts, 2001).

<sup>25</sup>Gail Silva made a similar point in her interview with the authors.

<sup>26</sup>This pattern appears to contrast with the policies of many performing arts organizations that have raised their prices for performing arts events.

In addition, media arts funding from the public sector has not fared well in recent years. Cutbacks in federal funding and the resultant shift to state and local government support have placed added burdens on media artists and media arts organizations to find new sources of funds. Although a select few filmmakers and other media artists are capitalized and thus able to support their own work, and others may be able to go through the lengthy National Endowment for the Humanities and foundation granting process (where lead times are often nine months or longer), most cannot afford to depend on government and foundation grants.

At the same time, the tendency of corporations to target larger organizations for support and to rely increasingly on categorical grants has made it more difficult for the media arts to secure funding from this source. Moreover, there is often an antipathy in the media (and other arts) toward the commercial world because of the perception that its system of funding and distribution is unfair and exclusionary.

Foundations, traditionally major supporters of the media arts, have also become increasingly prone to target their support. As a result, the media arts have sought to boost their earned revenues. Yet the scale and nature of their operations often mean that these efforts are directed less to admission receipts and more toward a variety of other activities for which users will pay and programs for which fees can be charged. For example, documentaries seem to be revenue-earners (e.g., *Doubletake*, *California Newsreel*). In sum, while there are more opportunities for support today, there is also more competition for those funds.

Perhaps the most promising development in funding for the media arts has been the emergence of what might be termed intermediary organizations that “broker” between the media arts and media artists and potential funders.<sup>27</sup> Examples of this phenomenon include Creative Disturbance, which seeks to foster collaborations between media artists and corporations as a form of corporate research and development, and Creative Capital,<sup>28</sup> which gives grants to individual artistic projects for audience development, marketing, and other assistance in exchange for shares of the proceeds generated. The proceeds are then reinvested in the work of other artists. These organizations help bridge the gap between the artistic and funding communities and in the process provide

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<sup>27</sup>As one interviewer of the CEO of Creative Disturbance wrote: “Being that us Nader-loving folk like to avoid direct connections to the slaves of shareholder value, several organizations are coming to our rescue by offering to run interference between our artistic side and capitalist guilt” (Mays, 2001).

<sup>28</sup>Creative Capital (<http://www.creative-capital.org>) is an outgrowth of the Andy Warhol Foundation. It has raised a \$5 million endowment fund with donations from individuals and foundations.

the set of skills necessary to secure the recognition and expertise (including business expertise) the media arts need to increase their earnings, where practical. Where increasing earnings is not practical, they can convince corporate and other supporters of the relevance of the media arts to their objectives.

Although there is unlikely to be a single solution to the funding problem, it is clear that the media arts, just as much if not more than the other arts, face a more difficult time raising funds than they have in the past.