



Tuesday, 4 October 2011, 1:30 pm.

Roundtable 8: The Outer Limits

Speakers

Erica Seccombe, Artist, Australia

Tim Senden, ANU College of Physical and Mathematical Sciences, Australia

Gavin Artz, CEO, Australia Network for Art and Technology

Moderator

Pia Waugh, IT Policy Advisor to Senator Kate Lundy and Digital Culture Sphere Coordinator, Australia

Rapporteur

Susan Hayes, Director, Literature, Australia Council for the Arts

Description of the session

The session was focused on a collaborative project between digital/visual artist **Erica Seccombe** and Professor **Tim Senden**, a surface chemist. The project was supported by a Synapse grant from ANAT, represented on the panel by **Gavin Artz**.

Gavin Artz cited Steve Jobs' comment that *'where the capacity to bring the arts, humanities and technology leads to success, others will follow'*.

He pointed out:

- Innovation per se does not necessarily mean 'new' or 'novel'. Its power lies in how it relates/applies to people.
- Technology must be culturally sympathetic. For example, scientists create a robot/machine but creative people work out how that machine will be culturally acceptable.
- Trans-disciplinary work creates a neuronal network, where the whole becomes more than the sum of the parts.

- Software and process which evolve from cross-disciplinary work transfer in economic terms to commercial practice.

Erica Seccombe's work created 3-D images of both static objects (e.g. plastic animals) and dynamic systems (e.g. seed growth).

Tim Senden's tools included an x-ray microscope from micron to centimeter scale. This was not a tried and tested technology. Rather, it created custom-built software, constantly changing to meet artistic demands. A significant outcome with the examination of seed growth was the provision of data to agricultural scientists on non-invasive techniques for research. In addition, the scientists working on the project developed innovative ways of exploring and presenting data.

All three panelists stressed the need for a relationship of equals in arts/science projects, with mutual respect for each side's contribution.

There are striking similarities between science research and the arts in that both can be long-term processes that explore space and time and may lead to unexpected outcomes. Research scientists and artists both bring imagination to their work and tend not to categorise.

Gavin Artz outlined the 'match-making' process that ANAT follows when setting up Synapse grants. Over the seven years of the project they have developed a database of artists and scientists. Gavin said that the best outcomes are produced by artists and scientists who have already forged a relationship at some level. He said that ANAT ensures that both parties are aware of the give and take necessary in shared project and that they establish a common language. Synapse projects are ideally a meeting of minds and not an institutional directive.

Panelists agreed that Australia is ahead of the world in trans-disciplinary practice but struggles with limited resources.

Creative intersections discussed in the session

This session was an excellent example of creative intersections, relating right back to the work of Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, whose DADA movement subverted established ways of making art.

Further collaborations could be set up in teams of artists, scientists, business and marketing to monetise the arts and increase artists' incomes.

The session also covered the benefits of technology to take the arts to regional communities, bringing gallery collections, performance and books beyond the metropolitan centres.

The session also stressed the importance of process over concrete outcomes and pointed out that at present funding bodies are reluctant to fund projects that do not have quantifiable outcomes.

Examples of good examples and practices

- Robin Fox's Music for the Bionic Ear has fed back into research to improve that technology.
- The Sydney Powerhouse put objects from its collection on line and crowd-sources information on their cultural context.
- UK artist Katie Paterson, in partnership with Vodafone, set up a phone line from a gallery where people could phone in and listen to a glacier melting in Iceland. This brought home a living example of the effects of climate change.

Identified problems

- Galleries/Institutions are wary of buying multi-media work as they do not have suitable space or technology to display them to their full potential.
- Equally, the artwork is difficult to show and sell in a traditional artworld context and new approaches are needed for future practicing artists.
- The education system forces a split between arts and science subjects. Primary school teachers usually have arts degrees and no training in science subjects.
- Funding bodies should encourage more collaboration between different artforms.
- Treasury is too outcomes focussed and does not fund process.

Recommendations for future actions

- There is an opportunity to cross-subsidise the artist in scientific programs to add meaningful value to the research.
- Skills development at schools needs to be cross/trans-disciplinary from primary school level through to tertiary. Teachers should show the similarities of the creative impulse in science, the arts and commerce.
- Funding bodies must develop ways to reward collaboration through policy, with added incentives for process.

Other additional comments

The session highlighted new career paths for artists, who may have a more significant impact on culture through research and commercial careers than the artworld rockstar moment of an exhibition opening.