Curating a Multimedia Exhibition

Introduction
The advent of new media and multimedia has seen a blurring of boundaries between the traditional and fine arts with cinema, film production, animation, theatre, graphic and industrial design, installation art, sculpture and virtual and web based art. All aspects of these media can be used in a work of multimedia or new media. 'Whereas traditional gallery exhibits have been perceived as being static, linear and 'requiring a passive form of appreciation, film, television, video, and multimedia are by contrast, 'interactive'.' (Witcomb, 2003) Thus, new and multimedia art works have for the first time, challenged the traditional notion of the art gallery.

This essay will compare and contrast traditional curatorial methods with modern ones. It will look at some of the issues involved in curating new and multimedia works. Specifically, it will explore the cost involved in mounting a new media exhibition, the need for expert computing and technological skills, acquisition and collection issues, as well as the problems of technological obsolescence and high costs. It will explore the history of curatorship and put this in the context of curating new media today, particularly examining how the physical boundaries of the traditional art gallery have changed since the advent of new media and technology. This essay won't find definitive answers, but rather, sets out ideas for further study. The terms 'gallery' and 'museum' will be used interchangeably and are defined as a place where works of art are collected and exhibited. Finally, it will look to the future of curating and discuss issues associated with the collection and storage of digital media.

It has been the job of the curator to guide the selection of a collection of works and mount displays and exhibitions. According to the Illinois State museum (2003) a curator is 'a person who cares for a museum's collections, conducts research and writes about collections, and provides information for museum programs and exhibits.' The word 'curator' evolved from from 'Latin cūrātor, **overseer**, from cūrātus, past participle of cūrā re, **to take care of**. It also comes from the Middle English curatour, **legal guardian**' (2004, YourDictionary.com).

The history of curatorship is as long as the history of museums. Museum-like institutions first rose during the Ptolemaic period in Egypt and continued to develop during the period of the Roman Empire. *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, (2004) In terms of exhibiting and curating works of art, several traditional methods have emerged throughout history. *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, (2004) describes traditional methods in which collections can be displayed. The first is as a linear walk-through, where works displayed 'are based on national schools, master–student relationships and chronological development.' More eclectic methods developed, including exhibits organised by thematic or formal relationships or even canvas size. Early in the 19th

century the French official and collector Alexandre Du Sommerard, developed the concept of 'period rooms'. This style of exhibiting enabled visitors to pass through an exhibition environment as a 'lived experience' rather than passing by objects arranged in a static and sequential order. *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, (2004) This format could be seen as being the forerunner for exhibiting multimedia, as multimedia tends to be 'experienced' often by more than one sense, rather than the purely visual experience of viewing paintings or sculpture. New and multimedia is also often arranged as a non-linear narrative, which is in contrast to the generally linear narrative found in exhibiting paintings or other traditional works of art.

Online Collections

Online sites such as Net.art, have emerged as virtual spaces where new media artists can exhibit their work. These virtual exhibition 'spaces' defy the physical boundaries of an art gallery or museum. At the same time that virtual exhibition space has been developing, Dietz (1998) states that 'technology, including the Web, has been making its way into the gallery for the past 30 years or more' and as a consequence, 'many artists have incorporated the Internet as an aspect of their physical installations in museums' and increasingly, 'exhibitions are designed to be at least partially online.' Dietz (1998) But is exhibiting online the same as curating an online exhibition? Dietz (1998) argues that 'putting some version of an exhibition online is not the same as curating on the Web…at the present time, the museum community is expending a great deal of effort simply digitizing its resources and making them increasingly accessible online. Digitizing assets is not dissimilar to the historical function of the museum to preserve artefacts…while lots of museum Web sites have lists of links, few tend to "curate" these links or offer much reason for listing them beyond a generic "sites to check out."' Witcomb (2004) suggests that museum sites maintain a clear distinction between the museum itself and the representation of its work and collections on the Web. A gallery will develop an online presence at least as a means of marketing an upcoming exhibition but 'they do not claim to be either a replica of the real museum or a substitute for it.' (Witcomb, 2004)

Cleland (2001, cited in Lovink 2001) argues that 'There are an increasing number of artists who work on the web and as bandwidth increases and download times decrease, the web will be the preferred delivery format for a lot of work that is now exhibited via CD-ROM or directly from computer hard drives.' In terms of exhibiting online, artists have no need for a specialist curator. If they have their own web space then they can exhibit directly there. One problem here is that websites come and go with regularity. What might have been exhibited at a certain address one week might not be there next week, month, year or decade. The nature of the web is that sites often change quickly. A curator's job includes critically examining works, particularly in order to decide what to collect. Collecting online work will be hard given the number of new media artists who exhibit independently on the web. Conversely, if online art galleries develop, then

it will be necessary for a curator to assess and collect work. Witcomb (2004) describes examples of cyber-museums which only exist through the technology of virtual reality. She describes a project called the Networked Virtual Art Museum based at Carnegie Mellon University in the USA, where visitors will be able to 'wander around a virtual full scale replica of an ancient Egyptian temple… while receiving lectures about it from costumed agents of that time period' Whitcomb (2004) If virtual galleries like this develop, they will require the expertise of a curator to determine which works are to be acquired. In contrast to real galleries having limited physical space to exhibit their collections, a virtual gallery can be nearly infinite in terms of 'space' to exhibit.

Traditional Galleries
Unlike art being exhibited on the web, the concept of the traditional gallery acquiring web – based and new media art for its collection is relatively new. For example, Dietz (1998) describes the acquisition of websites by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA).'The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art made one of the biggest splashes to date in terms of museums and the Web by "acquiring" portions of three Web sites: adaweb, Atlas, and Funnel….the conscious, curatorial decision to collect "this over that"--especially when "this" is a Web site--*is* a significant event.' The significance is that web sites or source code, have not until this point, been considered serious examples of art or design.
Kuchinskas (1997) continues that the 'SFMOMA is not the first museum to acquire digital art, but it is the first museum to collect Web sites as samples of design, and its approach raises important issues: What does it mean to collect a Web site? Is a Web site an example of mass media, or a discrete work of art?' These are new issues that curators are increasingly having to come to terms with in regard to new/multimedia.

Changing skills
Within the physical walls of a gallery, the boundary between exhibition space, installation rooms, cinema projection and the virtual world is increasingly blurring. In order to exhibit new and multimedia artwork, curators have had to develop skills in managing information technology. From high-end servers, networking and cabling, to data projectors and plasma screens, interactive kiosks, to virtual reality systems, the curator has had to become not just familiar with these items, but expert. Or if they aren't technically expert themselves, they need to hire people who are. At minimum, they need to know what is technically required, and have communication skills in order to convey this. New media curators also have to find money to finance all of this expensive hardware, with budgets often running at thousands and millions of dollars.

Cost issues

The new facility at Melbourne's Federation Square, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), is testament to the cost of exhibiting new media. Coslovich (2004) describes this as a purposebuilt and ambitious complex, 'dedicated to educating the public on the dominant cultural medium of its times - the moving image'

This $90 million State government funded facility runs 'at a cost of $15.8 million a year and employing 176 equivalent full-time staff.' Coslovich (2004) It also receives roughly $300,000 from corporate sponsorship. But ACMI has not been without its problems. It has had, as described by Coslovich (2004), an 'operating deficit - a $918,794 shortfall posted at the end of the 2002/2003 financial year, which the organisation is now striving to correct, despite being allotted an extra $10 million over two years in the May state budget.' ACMI Board President, Terry Cutler, states that this is due to 'teething problems expected of a "start-up" organisation. It's a new venue, it's a new operation; you're doing things that no one's done before and so you try to estimate what that's going to need.' Cutler (2004, cited in Coslovich 2004)

Cost comparison for 2003	ACMI	NGV
Initial start up cost	$90 million	£2000 or $800,000 equivalent*
Cost to run per annum	$15.8 million	$102 million
Number of staff (EFT)	176	267
Corporate sponsorship per annum	$300,000	$10.4 million
Profit/Loss	**-$918.794**	**+$36 million**

Table 1: Operating cost comparison between ACMI & NGV, 2003.

* As a comparison, wages in the 1860's varied 'from £1 per week for a station hand, up to £6 per week for a skilled tradesman (or between £50 to £300 per year). If this is equated to a wage range of $20,000-$120,000 per year in today's money, it means that £1 then was equivalent to about $400 now.' (Foley, 2004) Therefore in today's terms, £2000 would equate roughly to $800,000.

In comparison, the National Gallery of Victoria, has an operating budget of $102 million across two buildings, spends $12.5 million on salaries for 267 effective full-time staff, receives $10.4 million in sponsorship, and at the end of the 2002/2003 financial year, posted a $36 million profit. Coslovich (2004) However, the NGV has a solid history to lean on. 'It is one of the State's oldest public institutions, opening in 1861 as a museum of art.' Galbally (1987, p.12) It opened with an initial government grant of £2000. By the end of 1876, the NGV contained ' seventy seven oil paintings, 162 statues and works of art and 5908 watercolour drawings, engravings and photographs' (Michie, 1879) From this example it is far more expensive in today's dollar terms to not only set up an equivalent new media exhibiting space, but the ongoing operating costs are also high.

Perhaps ACMI is an extreme example of an operating deficit, but acquiring hardware to exhibit new/multimedia is always a costly exercise. The work of a curator has changed significantly since the technological revolution of the 1980s and 1990s. If curators want to exhibit new media they are faced with having to keep up to date with not only the cost but also the fast pace of technological change. Wallis (2000) states that 'Digital art is expensive. Projects are not noted for coming in within budget. In digital media, the project is endlessly flexible and the artist will pursue whatever they find interesting. The curatorial position sits somewhat uneasily between research and development on one hand and a necessary outcome on the other. Careful support and monitoring is required in a situation where artists are used to being left to manage a project for themselves.'

Technical Issues

What happens when a piece being exhibited in the gallery isn't what the artist envisioned – it's too bright or too dark, too fast or too long? It looked fine on the artists hardware, but it looks different in the gallery setting. Technical issues can also plague a curator or curatorial team. Wallis (2000) argues that technicians should be made available for the artist in order to overcome technical problems.

> 'For artists, new technology constantly challenges their technical ability. Not only does software development demand continual skills learning but, when the work reaches the point of exhibition, the technical demands are even greater. Does this place an unfair expectation on the artist's skills? Should technicians be provided to facilitate artists' intentions - with the artist as 'production director'? The assembly and presentation of digital art requires a different and more time consuming approach to the hanging of an exhibition of pictures - it is more like theatre or film production. To allow complex technical multimedia to be tested and run smoothly, a technical dress rehearsal period is required. In the same vein, an exhibition of digital art requires maintenance, like a theatrical production.' Wallis (2000)

Not only is it costly to initially acquire hardware (and software), but it is also costly to keep up to date with the fast pace of hardware depreciation and obsolescence. Cleland (2001, cited in Lovink 2001) talks about the problems of collecting digital art in that often 'works that are even a few years old sometimes rely on particular software and hardware that is increasingly difficult to find.' As hardware and software become obsolete, it becomes increasingly difficult to exhibit older pieces. 'Curators and artists need to think about archiving the hardware and software necessary to run individual artworks and perhaps rather than new media artists just providing a CD-ROM with their work on it, they may need to start thinking about their work as a complete package which includes the hardware and software required to run the work.' Cleland (2001, cited in Lovink 2001) Alternatively, artists and curators will need to keep migrating works to newer versions of software and hardware and this too will obviously take time and cost money. Another method of maintaining new media works, is to develop software emulators. Emulators are programs used to emulate software that was made

for other software systems or computers but again, this will require time and money to develop.

Conclusions

To conclude, we need to ask where curating will be in the future? What happens to all this new media art in 20, 50 100, 500 years time? Will it stand the test of time as traditional art works have? Will digital quality degrade, hard drives fail to work, and software become incompatible? Can we imagine curators of the future handling CDroms and hard drives with kid gloves, just as Renoirs and Caravaggios are handled today, to be kept in humidity and temperature-controlled environments? Will a new industry in preserving new/multimedia develop?

We have already seen that new media art requires a curator with a good knowledge of technology. Will art curating be split into two schools; those who curate traditional works and those who curate new/multimedia works? Will new media attract a new kind of curator, one with a more technologically savvy background? Or will new media eventually meld with traditional media so that technology is no longer an issue? In a generation or two most people (at least in the Western World), will be familiar with computing and technology. 'Cyberculture will lose its claim on the new and new media arts will vanish and dissolve into the much larger context of contemporary arts.' Cleland (2001, cited in Lovink 2001)

In time to come, new media will no longer be 'new', and eventually it will get locked into curating conventions, just as traditional art has. Eventually something else will take its place as being 'new'. At this stage, it is hard to say what that will be. After all before the advent of new media, traditional curating had been around for a couple of thousand of years. At the moment, however, new media is 'still new enough for there to be no rules. Because the technology is different, what you can do with it is different - we don't understand the language yet. The whole territory is wide open. It won't be very long before it gets locked down and new conventions are established. For the moment there are no restrictions in ideas. So it is not just a question of getting to grips with technology, nor is it a matter of learning to adapt from old style exhibitions to the more theatrical nature of new media. All aspects are open to question.' Wallis (2000)
Perhaps in the future, artists will only paint with pixels or sculpt only in polygons, causing the eventual decline of traditional art as we know it.
It will be interesting to see how these issues develop over the coming years. 'As for curating, we have no choice. We will go where the artists lead us.' Deitz (1998)

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