AHRC ICT Methods Network Symposium

VISIONS AND IMAGINATION: ADVANCED ICT IN ART AND SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON, 24 NOVEMBER 2007

Report by Gordana Novakovic

Background of the Event

The history of computer art/media art already covers a period of almost half a century, so it is clear that the use of ICT in art practice has a long tradition. However, although the field of art and science applies ICT in a novel, challenging and often controversial manner, it has never received the attention than many feel it deserves in this context. ICT is not only a major facilitator and catalyst in the process of amalgamating art with science; it is also capable of linking the two fields in a truly exploratory way. In addition, many contemporary art and science projects use ICT methodologies in ways similar to those used in the latest scientific and technological research.

As the original proposal noted:

'The symposium is intended to establish and define a new interface between the different stakeholders engaged in the further development of art and science through the use of advanced ICT. It will be the first time the various members of this new community have been brought together, and one of the key drivers for the symposium is the identification and development of the new research themes that will support and shape this development [...] Of course, the background against which the symposium is set is the field of art and science, which is itself rich in unresolved research questions. For example, its status within both of the source disciplines continues to be questioned. Is this because there are some real problems in the hybridisation of art with science and technology? If so, what is the nature and origin of the problems? Does it lie in art, or in science, or in the space between them? Similar questions have been asked before, by artists, scientists, critics, funding bodies, and others, but satisfactory answers do not seem to have appeared. We believe this is because the questions have been posed from particular points of view, often very different from the positions from which the proposed answers come. It would be unrealistic to expect a brief symposium such as this to address all of these issues, let alone to resolve them; however, we believe that by narrowing the focus to the consideration of work at the confluence of art, science, and advanced ICT, it may be possible for the communities involved to identify appropriate evaluative criteria that may guide research, theory, production, exhibition, and criticism.'

Content of the event

Thirteen speakers, including practising artists, curators, scientists, academics, and representatives of funding bodies, presented individual and disciplinary perspectives on key issues in the field of ICT-enabled art and science; the very lively and well informed audience, drawn from a similar range of backgrounds, contributed stimulating and insightful questions and responses throughout the day, especially in the last session – a structured discussion bringing the main points of the symposium together under four themes:

- Exhibiting ICT-enabled art and science projects;
- Evaluating ICT-enabled art and science projects;
- Resolving tensions between different disciplines involved in such collaborations;
- Funding transdisciplinary ICT-enabled art and science projects.

Two things became clear very early in the day's proceedings. The first was that the issues raised could be explored very effectively only because the speakers and attendees (thirty-eight in total) were drawn from all

of the relevant areas of activity – conception, funding, creation, exhibition, criticism, and teaching. This feeling was strengthened at the end of the day when the last talk, by Professor David Robey, provided us with a comprehensive insight into the visions and strategies of the research councils that both coloured and informed the final open discussion. The second realization was that, although many individuals (especially artists) had experienced a degree of isolation after choosing to work in this area, there was a very real and strong sense of community and common purpose throughout the symposium, and a realization that a framework – ideally, a funded network – should be found within which this type and level of interaction could continue.

Throughout the day, there were many more questions than answers – far more than can be easily summarized here. In the structured discussion, the two most important unresolved problems involved the first and last themes. For the first, Helen Sloan highlighted the many sources of the difficulties involved in exhibiting ICT enabled art and science; although there were many constructive suggestions, it was difficult to see how these problems could be tackled by the community at a level that would make a material difference. For the last, David Robey's analysis of the changes in ICT-related funding, and the impending reduction of available resources, certainly concentrated peoples' minds. In discussion it emerged that the increasing importance of university-sourced funding had to be acknowledged, although with a clear degree of reluctance from some participants. The discussion on evaluation focused, perhaps predictably, on the judgements of the scientific community – there seemed to be relatively few problems with the artistic side of things, and overall there was a degree of optimism, if not satisfaction. The issue of resolving tensions between disciplines was lightened and informed by Peter Bentley's contribution, in which he explained the professional risks for a scientist of being seen to be working with artists; the consensus was that open and frank communication between the artists and scientists engaged in an art and science project almost always resolved any problems in the collaboration, but that dealing with the perceptions of those not actually involved in the work might present more difficulties.

The immediate outcomes of the event are being made available to the relevant practitioner and student communities through the Method Networks website, and also through the host institution. A symposium webpage including abstracts of all contributions is already available on the Methods Network website, and on UCL's Tesla art and science group website (http://www.cs.ucl.ac.uk/research/tesla/). A full audiovisual record of the proceedings was made by a professional documentary film maker and will be archived and made available online at Digital Art & Humanities (http://www.arts-humanities.net). The availability of the audiovisual proceedings, which includes speakers' slides, will help to draw into the community those who could not attend the symposium itself, and may thus provide further impetus for the formation of an effective network. The UCL Tesla group website will be used as an initial platform for developing the community to a point from which a strong network proposal can be developed.

We are currently exploring various possibilities for capturing the content and spirit of the symposium in a publication. In a parallel development, five of the speakers have been invited to contribute to a volume in the series 'Digital Research in the Arts and Humanities'. The volume will be edited by Charlie Gere and Hazel Gardiner; it will focus on how artists use advanced ICT methods in their practice, with a particular emphasis on practitioners whose work relies on or features close collaboration with the scientific community.

Speakers, affiliations, and topics

Hazel Gardiner, AHRC ICT Methods Network: Introduction.

Gordana Novakovic, Honorary Artist in Residence, Computer Science Department, UCL: 'Neuroplastic Art'.

Professor Janis Jefferies, Director of the Constance Howard Resource and Research Centre and Artistic Director of Goldsmiths Digital Studios, Goldsmiths, University of London: 'In Collaboration'.

Liliane Lijn, Artist in Residence at Space Sciences Laboratories, University of California, Berkeley: 'Starshine-Stardust: Are we so different?'.

Dr Anthony Steed, Reader, Head of Virtual Environments and Computer Graphics, Department of Computer Science, UCL: 'Mixed-Reality Systems: Revealing the Real and Virtual Worlds'.

Stelarc, Chair in Performance Art, School of Arts, Brunel University, West London and Senior Research Fellow & Artist in Residence MARCS Laboratories, University of Western Sydney: 'Extra Ear: Ear on Arm (Internet Enabled Body)'.

Alexa Wright, Honorary Artist in Residence at UCL, Senior Research Fellow and Lecturer at the Centre for Art, Research and Technology Education at the University of Westminster in London, and Dr. Mike Lincoln, Research Fellow in the Centre for Speech Technology Research, University of Edinburgh: 'The Art and the Science of a Speech-based Interactive Installation'.

Dr Peter Bentley, Honorary Research Fellow and writer, Department of Computer Science, UCL: 'Viewing Systemic Computation'.

Julie Freeman, Wellcome Trust funded Artist in Residence at the Microsystems and Nanotechnology Centre at Cranfield University, and NESTA Fellow: 'Combining the Odd: Carp Behaviour, Nanotextures, Empathy Detection'.

Helen Sloan, Director of SCAN new media arts agency: 'Method or Hypothesis: The Changing Role and Importance of ICT in Art and Science Projects'.

Paul Brown, Visiting Professor at the Centre for Computational Neuroscience and Robotics and Department of Informatics, University of Sussex: 'The Pursuit of Autonomy: Art that Makes Itself'.

Professor David Robey, Programme Director, ICT in Arts and Humanities Research, AHRC, and Director of Research at School of Languages and European Studies, University of Reading: 'Current public funding of ICT in Arts and Humanities Research'.

The morning session was chaired by Paul Brown, and the afternoon session by Janis Jefferies.

Attendees

All speakers were invited and confirmed before the call for participation was announced on the AHRC Methods Centre website, the Tesla Art and Science Research Interest Group website at UCL, and via a number of established online networks and mailing lists. The plan was for a relatively small meeting in order to foster interaction between speakers and other participants; in the event, the level of interest was so high that the call had to be closed after only three days. Participants included independent artists, and staff/students from Goldsmiths, Middlesex University, Brunel University, Camberwell College of Arts, London Metropolitan University, Central Saint Martins College of Art, Royal College of Art, University of Sussex, Slade School of Fine Art, UCL - Bartlett School of Graduate Studies, LSE, University College for the Creative Arts, London College of Communication, The National Gallery, and the Institute of Artificial Art, Amsterdam.