

A Culture of Networks

26th November 2010

Speech given on the occasion of the opening of the New Media Arts graduating class' Introspect Exhibition at the Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville, Australia

It is always a great honour to be invited by the very people within whom you have invested such an enormous amount of time over a number of years to a gathering such as this to cite their achievements. It is also highly contentious - *how am I not to sing their praises?*

So my first platitude must go out to the organising committee who proposed this to me some weeks ago - I congratulate you for such a sly and calculating manoeuvre.

The request came via email, and there was a sentence in that email which was perhaps more persuasive than the opportunity to publicly praise the Bachelor of New Media Arts program - which is the conceit of events such as. The sentence read: "You have made a great contribution and had a very positive influence in the development of so many of us (students)".

Education is a deeply personal thing and those of us who have had to endure the distraction from everyday life that such an occupation manifests – i.e. the long suffering partners and family members of academics – can testify that feedback such as this can make those late night episodes buried deep in the bowels of LearnJCU worth all the effort.

Students however, still do not seem to realise that *money* and *wine* can also have a similarly positive and persuasive effect.

And so, publically, I would now like to now give you, the graduating class of 2010, some feedback.

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For me this journey began in the first few weeks of 2009's academic year. The BNMA program was at a crossroads, the split from the past was reaching its first real test - a 3rd year cohort who were about to prove one way or another that the investment in staff, technology and interdisciplinary curricula was as transformational as it was contentious. Yet beneath this popular narrative were a group of 2nd year students – the cohort who now present their wares to you tonight – who had other concerns on their mind ...

For instance, how *does* one boil their two minute noodles on campus? Where can I securely store my cheese and vegemite sandwiches from the heat of the NQ afternoon sun? From these deeply important conundrums about the day to day machinations of campus life followed the introduction of an important cultural initiative: The School of Creative Arts Student Association (CASA). This group of students drafted a considerable list of proposed improvements to campus life including a range of social activities, student to student tutorials, hallway gallery exhibitions and raised a substantial kitty of funds. All of a sudden we had a viable, funded creative arts campus culture built on the now familiar foundations of sausages, onions, bread and beer. And yes a microwave and a

refrigerator to facilitate the consumption of the essential fuel required for those late night sessions in the Bridge.

It must be acknowledged that the driving force behind much of this activity were the current group of graduating BMNA students. I could mention some names but I know that you know who you are. And I thank you for that. And I promise you, that that legacy which you started nearly two years ago will continue as the BNMA degree moves into its 5th year and beyond.

But why is this significant?

One of the key aspects of the New Media Arts curriculum is the emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration and cross cultural engagement. Of course all of this is good in theory, but for these principles to actually take root it requires the student body to embrace the philosophy and make it work for them. There is much evidence of this on show here tonight and at many of the recent Creative Exchange events held throughout the city in the past few weeks.

These students have managed to define what constitutes new media arts practice for themselves, and if I am reading the mechanics of their operation correctly this would be :

- the implementation of technique in a technological setting;
- the sharing of ideas within a collegial environment, and
- the realisation of complex narratives in a multi-platform, multi-media, multicultural setting.

This is by no means an easy task. In fact the professional world of the contemporary media artist is a very fractured and multi-layered sphere. One cannot rely solely on the representation of galleries, the management of PR reps or the negotiation skills of agents and business partners alone. The new media artist must engage in a range of skills that are both shared and broadcast beyond the confines of its medium. They resist the specificity of the past as their tools of this operation merge and interchange while their audiences fragment across geographic and cultural lines. The contemporary media artist must operate in an environment that is of itself a cultural form. We must become masters of this cultural form, designers of its language and authors of its conversation. We defy category and we subvert genre while at the same time we invent narrative possibilities and populate new worlds within an ever more crowded universe.

I am not an engineer, but I apply the rules of space and form to 3 dimensional worlds, I understand the weight and tension between objects. I am not a scientist but I interpret the data of a digital asset and code its properties for a multitude of outcomes. The physics of light and shadow are my tools. I am a dramaturge, a writer, a painter, an archivist - a chameleon. However, I am not a multi-instrumentalist. I have specific set tools that I wield at my discretion and to considerable effect. I am employed for my ability to compliment a team, to zone in on a particular task, to execute an idea and to turn oblique data into fine art.

A film is no longer a print, but an asset to be wielded - online, in the cinema and on the screens of a variety of devices. A song is not a media product but a viral cultural artefact. The processes of illustration are shared on blog sites and detailed in web tutorials as the technique is distributed

across a dense network of artists and Imagineers. The properties of digital culture demand this shared network because that shared network is at the heart of everything that we do.

Truly the works which surround us on these walls are products of a culture of networks.

And so to the graduating students here in this room and the emerging artists who have come to witness these works and with whom they no doubt recognise similarities in their own practice I put it to you simply :

Network.

Share the skills which make the world a more literate space. Be the instrument which affects change. And most importantly continue the journey that you started many years ago. In other words, remain fiercely committed to the refinement of your practice and the exploration of new ideas.

There is a lone scrawl of graffiti on the toilet roll in the men's toilet block at SoCA. It reads: "You are not your art". And as much as I despair at the sanitised culture of modern education establishments and the reluctance of the modern student to rage against the conservative mores of the establishment, I am emboldened by the survival of this wee little scrawling of text.

Indeed you are not your art. Rather, you are the node in the network, the switch in the exchange, the enlightened passage of code. But perhaps most importantly you are the decisions that make your art a desirable product - the decisions which produce meaning and animate the properties of its context, the decisions which are about to multiply exponentially in the next phase of your professional lives.

Each work that is presented here tonight is the result of the decisions that you made in the process of their construction. Every art work therefore is an opportunity. I trust, given the years of hard work and tough decisions you have had to make thus far in your New Media Arts degree that in the future you will continue to choose wisely.

It is then with much good will and considerable pride that I declare *Introspect*, the graduate exhibition of 2010, officially open.

Thank you and good luck.

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