

# THE DAY THE CIRCUS CAME TO TOWN (ISEA98, CONSENSUS POLITICS AND THE FESTIVAL SYNDROME)

By Pauline van Mourik Broekman, 7 October 2004

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It has become a commonplace to describe the array of electronic and media art festivals held throughout Europe today as a travelling circus. Suggesting dazzling but ultimately superficial entertainment with only a fleeting relevance for its viewers this moniker of the moment also conjures up a repetitive presentation of the same things over and over again, irrespective of locale. Certainly, were you to follow it, your hectic festival itinerary would span much of Europe and much of the annual calendar. From Linz to Rotterdam, Gwent to Osnabrück - after a slow start in springtime the show peaks, finally, during the late autumn months when the 'major' festivals occur in quick succession. Then the proverbial tents are dismantled, horses and elephants are safely tucked away in their stables and the ringmasters start to gear themselves up for another year of performances.

Irrespective of location or host organisation, their ambitious thematic scope, growing global reach and loyal band of attendees ensure that events like ISEA, Ars Electronica, EMAF, DEAF, Consciousness Reframed, CyberConf and Viper, to name but a few (some annual, some bi-annual and others more irregular), continue to act as prime catalysts for debate. Importantly, these festivals also function to showcase recent international work to the respective local audiences while, vice-versa, providing different frames of reference for, and analysis of that work. Nothing new under the sun, you might say: in this, the festivals are no different, more or less context sensitive (or indeed compromised) than any other type of 'travelling circus', be that a trade fair, contemporary art biennial or academic congregation. Perhaps their damning nickname is but a jocular swipe aimed at technology-heavy shows and a tiny group of professional travellers? However, lately it has felt as if there is something rotten in this electronic state of Denmark. Notwithstanding the gradual process of development each event may have undergone, a more general and profound process of evaluation is going on - both on the part of the host organisations themselves and their most devout publics (not to mention the 'general public' in whose name the larger events are, by definition, put on). As with the other cultural 'circuses' (Manifesta and the Berlin, Venice and Sydney biennials come to mind) questions are being asked as to the usefulness, continuing relevance and ultimate beneficiaries of a year-in year-out wagon trail of bonanzas: is there really anything more profound to all this than the sophisticated management of international, or rather Western, cultural industries? Are regional, local audiences not only attending these events but also getting something out of them? Taking part in the panel 'Biennials: Hope or Hype?' at the recent ICA symposium *Beyond the Artist*, Manifesta co-curator Robert Fleck for example commented that, of the already small (c. 13.000) audience that actually visited the Manifesta2 exhibitions, only a fraction (c. 3.000) resided in the host city of Luxembourg - attributing the relative size of the visiting audience largely to professional motives). When arguing for the necessity and good of the biennials, the festivals, the symposiums, what is being assumed about

the desires of local and visiting audiences? What is being assumed about the ways in which cultural production and consumption works?

The last five years have seen the ascendance of informal resources like electronic mailing lists that are available year-round and cheap (although dependent, of course, on not so cheap technology and access infrastructures). Feeding off the dispersed and often inconspicuous offshoots of local public moneys and private investment, culture and technology related lists like Rhizome, nettime, Syndicate, Faces, re::code and Xchange in conjunction with a rambling series of small but closely associated events have provided compelling ancillary environments - and counterpoints - to the larger 'electronic art' festivals. More conspicuously, and by virtue of their deeper integration into everyday life, they have provided alternatives to the attempts by organisations like ISEA, the International Society of Electronic Arts, to act as community builders.

One of the missing links between these smaller networks and events and the larger ones is their relationship to audiences and audience numbers: whereas many thousands will visit the festivals, in the main related lists are subscribed to by hundreds. Likewise, whereas information about the former is accessible in a multiplicity of contexts, the lists and their associated events can seem inaccessible and dependent on intensely codified discourses. Yet, rather than act in a process of mutual fortification, nurture and dialogue as it has done elsewhere in this cultural landscape, here the emergence of one structural matrix seems to be endangering the life of another.

Depressingly, the one achievement on which broad consensus does exist is the festivals' capacity - out of hours that is - to act as productive, pressure-cooker style meeting places: compact, congenial and fun. Perhaps we should never have wished for more, but this scenario does make one wonder whether the events' still-sizeable budgets are being well spent and whether the high-flying dictums about audience participation, 'outreach', global discourses, interdisciplinarity and cultural collaboration (alive and well in all but the least self-confident) can go on being made unridiculed.

Isn't there also a false dichotomy in the making through which some notional local community and public - translated, largely numerically, as either the cringe-worthy 'bums-on-seats' or the more polite 'attendance figures' - comes to determine the success of an event and justify its form and continuing existence while more critical, and certainly more partial, assessments of quality, radicality, diversity, thematic coherence and public participation are consigned to the dustbin for being 'politically motivated' or elitist? To be sure, this is an only slightly dressed up version of the aged debate about elite and mass cultures, but it is doubtful that such a binary relationship should still be quite so easily made.

This was well illustrated during the preamble and subsequent staging of ISEA98, this year held in Liverpool and Manchester and entitled Revolution/The Terror, in which both ISEA's own growing pangs and the tensions inherent in putting on large-scale (electronic) art fairs were put on full display. Arguments centred on prohibitive costs, a kowtowing to the academy, vague and - for some - depoliticised treatment of themes as well as a lack of overall coherence. They can be characterised by this, an extract from an open e-mail Diana McCarty - co-moderator of the Faces mailing list - sent to Lulu Jones, convenor of ISEA98 Liverpool panel 'Variant Architecture[s] within Cyber-celibacy' after Jones had dismissed complaints about high prices as false radicalism:

"I think you are partly missing the point to assume that the critique is limited to the price of attending ISEA98. Rather, I think it is the inherent paradox of an elite, academic conference adopting the theme of revolution. Do we agree that the realm of the revolutionary is that of those ideas/things/battles which

will have an impact on the masses? If so, then the price issue becomes understandably problematic - it is a real barrier to the masses participating in whatever discourse evolves during the event. The cost or technology is neither a new issue, nor is it revolutionary in the circuit of new media conferences (I believe we are all familiar with the discourse of technology as an elite tool in the first place). Now we have an elite symposium for an academic elite, just how revolutionary can ISEA become? ... It seems that it might be more beneficial for ISEA to question its own role, rather than paying lip service to the margins and then criticising the margins for not being satisfied. ISEA (or its staff & organisers) does not, by default, become revolutionary in addressing this theme any more than it became a contentmeister last year when the theme was content."(Faces, Diana McCarty: "Lulu Jones - comments on ISEA prices and starving artists", 18/7/1998)

The number of ways in which each festival acts as a point of crystallisation or refraction of local and international cultural politics is impossible to enumerate here - each is subtly different at many levels. Suffice it to say though that each, apart from setting its own cultural agenda and programme with all the concomitant opportunities for presentational experimentation etc., is also subject to processes of instrumentalisation. However, it would not only be onerous, but also counterproductive to analyse the lot, rationale and history of 'festivals' tout court. It might instead pay to look at ISEA, for the UK this year's biggest circus, in isolation. The unique task it has set itself - of being event-organiser, society and umbrella organisation of sorts demands this doubly; much of the apparent disgruntlement regarding this year's proceedings stems from the expectations (and confusions) this self-declared



remit have created.

ISEA started out as an interdisciplinary venture, aiming to bring people involved in the electronic arts in touch with each other, showcase work and break down the barriers that its founders, Wim van der Plas and Theo Hesper, saw between existing computer related conferences (like Ars Electronica, Siggraph, etc.). Its other aim was to break down the 'Enlightenment inherited' bifurcation between the sciences, arts and humanities. The First International Symposium on Electronic Arts, organised by the Dutch Foundation for Creative Computer Applications was held in 1988, in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Two years later, a proposal put forward there - to develop an organisation that would structure "a systematic and scientific (my italics) approach to the problems and potentials of electronic art" became a reality. Ten years hence and ISEA is a relatively small society running on membership payments, a minimal amount of Canadian public funding and an unspecified donation from Softimage's founder Daniel Langlois, a benefactor who is broadly supportive of ISEA's potential role as a gateway organisation for the electronic arts on a global level. ISEA's 'HQ', based in Rotterdam between 1991 and 1996, now resides in Montréal.

Much like any society, ISEA aims to provide its constituency, a mix of professionals working in the arts and sciences (although the former predominate), with a variety of practical and theoretical resources. It regularly publishes a newsletter, promotes dialogue and collaboration between members and

doubles up as the co-organiser of the annual International Symposiums of Electronic Art, festivals (including extensive exhibition programmes) which it co-ordinates in collaboration with local host organisations around the world (and which also function as platform and outlet for the concerns and activities of its members, whose participation is organised via a juried selection procedure). It does so in a spirit of open dialogue and enquiry, the values of which are repeated mantra-like in much of its literature.

So, is there a conflict between the 'systematic and scientific' approach ISEA is attempting to muster and the experimental ethos it sees as integral to its identity? And are its other aims - "the promotion of communication between organisations and individuals active in the field of the electronic arts"; "the promotion of interdisciplinary cooperation, between aesthetic experts and scientific/technological experts" - dependent on stable, administrative and financial structures which are mutually exclusive with the cultural nomadism - and radicality - it prides itself on?

I posed some questions along these lines to Eddie Berg, director of FACT (the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) and, as such, of Revolution98, the exhibitions and events component of ISEA98. In the drive to get bums on seats, funding to cover all expenses, make sure events are well co-ordinated and marketed, planned far enough in advance, properly affiliated with partner organisations, etc. isn't something important being lost? Does the new culture of 'expertism', aimed for so zealously by cultural organisations of all hues, run counter to ISEA's - perhaps even electronic art's - past? A totally different mode of participation and/or viewing seems to exist at smaller, more informal, events and, while people begrudgingly admit that these can be chaotic and exclusive - in spite of their egalitarian aims (a good example being the manner in which the Revolting temporary media lab [www.yourserver.co.uk/revolting](http://www.yourserver.co.uk/revolting)), held during Manchester's ISEA98, was perceived) their 'small' successes beg the question whether the awry ledger account that pits individual cultural experiences against Total Number of Cultural Experiences Had isn't extremely problematic.

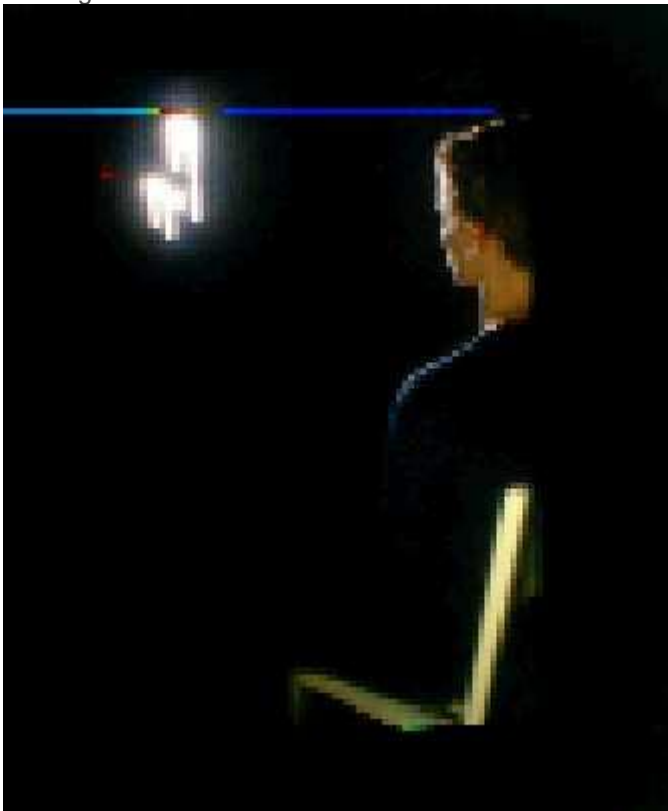
Eddie Berg remained optimistic. "I still believe in the blockbuster event's ability to grab media attention, provide critical focus, attract audiences and investment," he said, but added that he was wary of certain aspects: "But size isn't everything. Good ideas and projects can get lost in the cornucopia of openings, events, parties, press calls and the sheer scale of the euro-standard art bonanza. You have to know what you want to see (or hear). I'm not sure anymore if the big-event serves every artist's best interests. I think we achieved a little bit of the best of both worlds at ISEA. Revolting was chaotic and irritatingly elitist, but probably held some of the most insightful and interesting moments for many people. For other people the big-event conferences often feels like a redundant, inert exercise, with the same people talking about the same things to one another. Meaningful exchange and dialogue occurs only in the spaces in between. My personal jury is out on this one."

Sean Cubitt, consultant to Liverpool John Moores University's Revolution symposium and co-ordinator of its 'Bio-architectures' panel, was more fatalistic: "Me, I like a big blast once in a while. On the other hand, given the annual round of annual events, and our experiences with VideoPositive [a bi-annual video and new media festival also held in Liverpool and co-hosted by FACT] I reckon biennials would be better. On the other hand, the dinosaur bash is clearly ripe for the remaking, at Documenta or Venice as much as in e-arts. Genuinely thematic shows/events tend (only tend, mind you) to restrict the creativity of the curator. Which may be fine in itself, but may well run after the contemporary development. Permanent exhibition spaces like ZKM [Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, [www.zkm.de](http://www.zkm.de)], without perhaps the medium specificity and the canonical works but with a regular programme, in every city in the world, with touring budgets to ensure genuinely global access would be nice. Impossible, but nice. Nicer still would be the existing global nets of art institutions and art publications noticing that the ground has moved from under their feet. This is why London is so

moribund as an art city, a suburb of New York misplaced 2,000 miles west of SoHo." Clearly, there is no love lost between Cubitt and a deluded London: "A good question to ask is why London has no e-arts presence worth shaking a stick at - it's because its scene is dominated by galleries with no interest at all in anything they didn't learn at art school. Dead from the neck up."

When asked whether we can still talk meaningfully about the electronic arts as an experimental and cross-disciplinary practice, as all of ISEA's literature does, or whether the word has come to denote a rather more fixed and stable category, ready for mummification in the museum, Cubitt offered this riposte: "Sure there's a canon, and it is in the interests of ISEA to promote both that canon - to get into the major galleries and collections, and to criticise it, while promoting other artists who do not figure in this way. It is naïve to believe ISEA members can alter the art world, or indeed that they wish to. Personally, I am in favour of doing away with the concept of art, or rather the professionalised institutional and discursive structures that exclude from funding and discussion the vast majority of the world's cultural activity." Cubitt's died-in-the-wool disdain of cultural naïveté also stretches to those who complained about ISEA98's depoliticisation of the notion of Revolution: "The word revolution has been depoliticised by history, not by ISEA."

Meanwhile Peter Ride, director of Bristol based digital arts agency DA2 and recently a nominee for ISEA's board, maintains that the seed of most if not all ISEA's ills lies in the obfuscations and confusion surrounding the relationship between ISEA the symposiums and ISEA the society: "ISEA needs to make clear that it is separate from the local projects". In his eyes, this would also open the way to the society becoming more pro-active: "Officially, they're supportive and therefore too close to be critical." Go to the ISEA website [[www.isea.qc.ca](http://www.isea.qc.ca)], look at any of Wim van der Plas's feedback to ISEA98 and this uneasy relationship becomes painfully clear: swerving constantly between a kind of paternal, constructive support and what seems like a nervous anticipation of the manner in which each event might harm the 'franchise' and overall reputation of the organisation, it makes for confusing reading.



Look at this situation from the host's perspective however, and the picture changes again. After having paid \$3000 'for the privilege' of using the logo, as Eddie Berg expressed it (during last summer ISEA decided to reinvest this yearly fee, usually \$5000, in its newly formed diversity fund), an organisation must be left both constrained and frustrated by the reams of guidelines by which they have to abide. These 'symposium host candidate'

guidelines [[www.isea.qc.ca/symposium/guidelines.html](http://www.isea.qc.ca/symposium/guidelines.html)], the various committees (including a new

international advisory committee - IIAC - and the one for cultural diversity mentioned above) are no doubt precisely what ensures the society's currency and internationalism in its own eyes. They also bolster its accountability and 'social democratic' style of governance, if that is the appropriate word. But it remains difficult to tally the high level of bureaucracy they can only engender with Wim van der Plas's recent comment that the continuing success of ISEA rests on its capacity to remain fluid, nomadic and pluralistic in its approach; that it will otherwise "run the risk of petrifying into a traditional structure as has happened with so many other events of this nature." On top of that, it would be naive to think that the guidelines and committees, whose flavour comes across as more indebted to academic than artistic contexts, don't have implicit values. It is for example a specifically academic structuring principle that Andreas Broeckmann, co-organiser of V2\_'s Dutch Electronic Art Festival DEAF [[www.v2.nl/DEAF](http://www.v2.nl/DEAF)] and a slightly exasperated observer of ISEA's activities, sees as the unacknowledged centre of gravity of the organisation: "They fail to recognise the encompassing role that they could be playing for the global electronic arts community, and instead they are an academic club."

For his part Alain Mongeau, chair of ISEA since 1996, is bemused by ISEA's current reputation: "The tendency to categorise ISEA and the ISEA symposium as the 'elite' has appeared only recently ... I think it is a perception that has evolved in relation to very polarised local politics in the UK ... If one analyses both the history and the current state of ISEA, in reality it is a very frail organisation that still needs to score a major breakthrough if it wants to survive. Its struggles are very similar to those of [www.adaweb.com](http://www.adaweb.com) for instance, as the help first provided by the Canadian and Quebec governments and then by the Daniel Langlois Foundation has been temporary. In fact as an organisation ISEA still faces its greatest challenge yet: it needs both to reinforce its 'raison d'être' and to stabilise its financial means at the turn of its first ten years of existence."

The discussions surrounding ISEA's activities represent, in a microcosm, many crucial issues facing 'network society' - those of leadership, organisational accountability and the development of culture in social networks. There is something reminiscent in all this of the problematic status of NGOs, for example, or for that matter the score of intra-governmental organisations set up to do work in the name of some universal good. Many will find this comparison ludicrous (what does a couple of hundred-member, poorly funded, arts organisation have to do with an international special interest player like Greenpeace or indeed an organisation like UNESCO?). But it doesn't surprise me that, according to Peter Ride, the word UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) was 'bandied around' a lot in the criss-cross dialogues leading up to ISEA's reformulations of its remit two years ago. Both Broeckmann's description of ISEA's possible 'encompassing role' and Daniel Langlois's desire to see ISEA act as a gateway organisation of international renown, a leader in short, point in this direction - if certainly with different personal interpretations attached. Append to this the debates surrounding the potential some instead see incarnated in cheap (again, relatively), rhizomatic, net mediated, discursive structures like mailing lists and you have an intriguing parallel to the way ad-hoc, grassroots and intensely localised activist groups relate to their grander, bureaucratic and/or heavily financed neighbours.

Is the open, erratic and unpredictable cultural dialogue so fervently desired by ISEA more likely to emerge from structures of this kind? Or is this yet another false opposition?, the lists and ad-hoc groups having their own cross to bear when it comes to representation and accountability - as anyone will know who has followed the acrimonious debates about moderation on nettime [[www.factory.org/nettime](http://www.factory.org/nettime)] or who believes in what Richard Barbrook calls, after Jo Freeman, 'the tyranny of structurelessness' (see Mute 11, "The Holy Fools" [[www.metamute.com/issue11/fools.htm](http://www.metamute.com/issue11/fools.htm)]). It seems we're destined to alight at a conversation that is thirty rather than three years old, namely one about direct and representational types of

governance and democracy, albeit updated for a networked society. It seems also that we have to acknowledge a far greater degree of interdependence between the two types of organisation than many of us currently do.

The day the circus came to town used to be fun. Worlds of fantasy opened up and, when the elephants walked out of the ring, people were sad to see their pathetic little tails and big behinds. People didn't want them to be integrated into everyday life. They weren't, and that was the whole point. The hope of the early electronic arts, and their festivals, was that the separations built into this spectacle might be turned around: perhaps the audience could have even stepped into the ring. The sad, and contradictory, result of interrogations into ISEA's (and, to a certain extent other festivals') legitimacy is that it seems the baby has been thrown out, not the bath water. The excess, singular visions, excitement and risk we associate with our favourite, double-edged analogy - circuses - have gone out the window while the scaffolding, portaloos, civic representatives and money lenders have been left behind. Are these just the teething pains of a more socially inclusive circus or are we destined to rerun the antinomies of consensus politics till we're too old to care?

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