

## THE INTER-SOCIETY FOR THE ELECTRONIC ARTS REVIVED?

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### Abstract

This is an edited version of an introduction written for the panel session with the same name of June 13, 2013. The editing took place after the session was held. Both the introduction and the panel session are seen as the beginning of a discussion that should help to give direction to the future of ISEA.

This article was edited by ISEA International board member Bonnie Mitchell, and received input from the panellists as well as from Wolfgang Schneider, Roger Malina and Peter Beys. The panellists were Bonnie Mitchell, Anne Nigten (former ISEA board member), Vicki Sowry (ISEA2013 organiser), Ernest Edmonds (presenter at the first ISEA symposia) and Peter Anders (ISEA International board member). I would like to thank them all for their constructive thinking.

The panel proposal is followed first by a mini manifesto (why cooperation?) and then an historic overview of ISEA, which is celebrating its 25th birthday this year. Before presenting the viewpoints of the panel members, I will try to give some of those viewpoints an historic context, and add to that some insights from personal experience. Finally, I will try to draw some conclusions. In that way I hope to lay the foundation for a more or less structured discussion that will continue after the panel and ISEA2013 are over.

**Keywords:** Electronic Art, Emergent Art, Media History, International Symposium on Electronic Art, Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts

### The Proposal

The original aim of ISEA was to connect all organisations that are active in the field of the electronic (or emergent) arts; thus ISEA would become a meta-organisation.

The goal of the first ISEA Symposium, held in 1988 in Utrecht, the Netherlands, was not to begin a series, but to establish the meta-organisation by creating a gathering at which the plan for this association of organisations could be discussed and endorsed. This is exactly what happened, and the association, called the Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts (ISEA), was founded 2 years later in the city of Groningen (the Netherlands), prior to the second ISEA symposium, in the same city. The continuation of the symposia, thus making it a series, was another result of the historic meeting in Utrecht.

Quite possibly, the goal was too ambitious, and the founding fathers too much ahead of their times. When a panel meeting was organised on the stage of

the second symposium, with representatives of SIGGRAPH, the Computer Music Association, Ars Electronica, ISAST/Leonardo, ANAT, Languages of Design and others, the discussion was reasonably civilised, but behind the scenes tempers flared, as nobody wanted to lose autonomy.

Looking at ISEA2013's theme and sub-themes, this is the time to put co-operation on the table! To quote from the ISEA2013 site:

*-Resistance is Futile: Electronic Art now lies embedded in the heart of our contemporary cultures.*

*-Histories and Futures of Electronic Art: ISEA2013 offers a platform to explore where electronic art has come from, where it is going and what it might become.*

*-Creation, Collaboration and Consumption: ISEA2013 encourages debate, provocations and engagement in the global nets of participation.*

### Mini Manifesto

for a Network Organisation for the Emergent Arts

1. We live in a world that is governed by economic laws. The economy in charge is mainly based on profit maximisation by individual enterprises (as opposed to collective initiatives).

2. Meanwhile, history is being governed by expansion of human knowledge, encompassing both insight and imagination, or science and art, together known as culture.

3. The development of science and its practical application, technology, is extremely fast, providing for rapid changes in production, medicine, social life and so on. The economic motor requires us to consider every technological advance as a potential source of profit.

4. This obscures our vision of future well-being on a global scale. The only counterweight at our disposition is art, the other side of the cultural moon. In such a serious context, it is of essential importance that all art initiatives which consciously aim at grasping the implications of technological development, put their heads together and co-operate. The aim should be to structurally and systematically (in other

words, scientifically) approach the artistic potentials of our new age.

### History

The idea to start ISEA was conceived by Theo Hesper, currently a resident of Indonesia. Theo was founder and board member of the Dutch Foundation for Creative Computer Applications (SCCA), of which I was the director. The SCCA partnered with the Utrecht Art School to organise the first ISEA symposium in Utrecht. The Utrecht Art School made a commitment during the first symposium to organise the next one too, in two years' time.

However, less than a year later, I received an e-mail message from Roger Malina, who had participated in the historic meeting in Utrecht. He informed me that the Utrecht Art School had told him they were not going to be able to pull off the second symposium, and he asked me whether I saw any other possibilities. I worked for the computer animation department of Groningen University (then called Polytechnic) of Applied Sciences, which boasted a famous art school (Minerva) and a Music Conservatory with an electronic music department. The school agreed to host the symposium; it sprang into action and organised a quite successful second ISEA in 1990. Nearly 500 proposals were received, and approximately 250 international and 250 Dutch participants attended.

First in Utrecht, and even more so in Groningen, an enthusiastic group of Australians insisted that they would organise the third symposium in 1992 in Sydney. That symposium was of a larger scale, involving major museums and galleries; the following symposia held in Minneapolis (1993) and Helsinki (1994) were rather modest; however the one held in Montreal (1995) was relatively large.

Before the second symposium, Theo Hesper and I founded the Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts (with the same acronym as the symposium), thus fulfilling the goals expressed at the historic Utrecht meeting. The name was coined by Roger Malina. It was an association, and it was intended that its members be institutes and organisations; however, as we had no funding whatsoever, we decided to allow individuals to join too, and managed to enrol around 100, rising to 200, members, many of them non-paying. Only a few (5-10) of the members were institutions; many were students, paying

a reduced fee. The association was run by a number of volunteers—Dirk Boon and Rene Paré in the Netherlands, and, among others, Yoshiyuki Abe in Japan and Rejane Spitz in Brazil. However, none of the volunteers could work for ISEA as part of their paid professional job.

The ISEA members wanted something in return for their membership dues, so we negotiated a symposium fee reduction for ISEA members, and produced a monthly newsletter, including an extensive event agenda, job opportunities, calls for participation, etc., that was distributed via snailmail. Over the years, more than 100 newsletters have been produced. Yoshiyuki and Rejane translated the newsletter into Japanese and Portuguese (for the Brazilians), and we called them our Japanese and Brazilian branches. Our main job was to coordinate the continuation of the symposia.

The Montreal symposium in 1995 was so successful that the organisers were subsequently able to get funding to take on the running of the association, and bring 'HQ', as we called the secretariat, to their city. The organisation behind this initiative was the Société Des Arts Technologiques (SAT), and the sponsorship came from the Daniel Langois Foundation. Alain Mongeau (*ISEA95* director) and Monique Savoie (SAT) were the main players.

The Canadians were able to bring together physically the international board of the Inter-Society with several members of the advising committee, in order to discuss the future of ISEA over several days of intensive meetings. They also organised a 'General Assembly on New Media Art', called Cartographies, which took place from October 12-14, 1999. Its aim was to make progress 'toward a definition of new media art'. Present were representatives of the Inter-Society, Montreal Festival of New Cinema & New Media, Banff, University of Quebec, McGill University, Daniel Langois Foundation (all Canadian), Ars Electronica (Austria), V2 (Netherlands), Art3000 (France), Muu (Finland), Mecad (Spain), DA2 (UK), Walker Art Center (USA) and others.

Taken from the flyer for this assembly: the "works of today are polysemic, multi-sensorial, interactive, virtual. In search of an identity of their own, they demand new criteria of evaluation and understanding, as well as new sensibilities". It would, of course,

have been unrealistic to imagine that this 3-day summit would result in definitive answers to the questions on the table, but it was, at least, the beginning of a collaborative effort to solve common problems.

The question of funding dominated many of the presentations and discussions. As Valérie Lamontagne described in the CIAC Magazine: "Certain initiatives did result from this discussion, mainly the desire to form a nation-wide media arts lobbying organization." But her conclusion speaks for itself: "Media arts still remains an art practice fraught with contradictions in practice and philosophy"[1]. The most distinct observation of Valérie was: "Cartographies focused on the one hand on a movement away from computer-based art practices towards interactive projects done in collaboration with the scientific and artistic community, and, on the other hand, on projects being done in an independent fashion which no longer necessitated 'center' and 'distributors'. A dichotomy was formed between a populist approach to technology and more expensive and institution-driven media arts production."

All of this was, clearly, a very hopeful beginning to the Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts. However, around the year 2000 the Daniel Langois Foundation terminated its support, and the Montreal HQ ceased to exist. It had become apparent that funding a truly international (nomadic, even) organisation would be terribly difficult.

After the year 2000, the ISEA headquarters was, once again, run by volunteers only. In the Netherlands it became a project for a student team to maintain central communication. The team was succeeded by Angela Plohman, who contributed tremendously, practically for free. Shortly afterwards, two Dutch board members managed to obtain subsidies from the Mondriaan Foundation and the VSB Fund for building an online archive to store important ISEA documents. The project manager, Nadia Palliser, took it upon herself to direct the ISEA's HQ for the duration of the project. The archive project culminated with a presentation of the results in Singapore, *ISEA2008*.

During that same year, the Inter-Society made two major decisions. The ISEA Board decided that the symposium host city would have to pay a fee to the ISEA headquarters so that it could fund the management of the organisation. The

second decision was made in consultation with the ISEA membership, and was to become a foundation instead of an association. The Inter-Society went to sleep (it still exists, but is dormant), and ISEA International saw the light of day.

The University of Brighton offered to host the International ISEA headquarters, with Sue Gollifer as the Director. From then on we charged the symposium hosts a fee of €10K, of which 80% goes to the University of Brighton; however, this still does not allow us enough room for development, so we recently raised the fee to €15K.

## Policy

Where the Inter-Society was overly optimistic and naïve, the ISEA International foundation has limited its goals to what it is able to reasonably accomplish. A volunteer organisation requires professionals in order to work effectively.

ISEA International has only 3 aims: to ensure that the series of symposia continues, to maintain a secretariat (HQ), and to maintain the two websites (the general [isea-web.org](http://isea-web.org) and the online archive)[2]. With the conception of the foundation we decided we would endorse initiatives from individuals or institutes to create ISEA projects, but we would not take on initiatives ourselves, as we lacked the capacity to carry projects through to the end.

Keeping the symposia 'in the air' has been the main concern of, first the Inter-Society (even though the official primary aim went beyond that), and then ISEA International. It is not enough to find a city or a university that wants to organise a symposium; the task of maintaining ISEA's character takes a major investment of time and energy. ISEA International does not want to duplicate what other organisations are doing. Ars Electronica, for example, existed before the ISEA symposium did; ISEA is primarily an 'academic' conference, and Ars Electronica a festival. Some of ISEA's other characteristics were not preconceived, but grew naturally out of the original initiative: its nomadism, its 'un-institutionalised' appearance, and the feeling that the participants 'own it'.

The board of the Inter-Society, and then ISEA International, have invested a great deal of energy in developing Guidelines for Symposium Hosts [3], and also a contract to ensure commitment to the ISEA symposium character. The first thing some

organisers do, for example, is to announce ISEA as a 'festival'. The ISEA board also always needs assurance that participation in the symposium is not obstructed by financial thresholds. Currently we are revising the Guidelines and contract once more to address these issues, with the aid of a legal professional.

Improving the symposium is one of the major focal points of the board. This is not easy, due to the fact that each symposium is run by a different group of people in another part of the world. Sometimes, after signing the contract, the hosts throw away the Guidelines and forget who we are. Maybe I exaggerate, but I sometimes get the feeling that they see the ISEA International Guidelines as a burden. The symposium organisers have to pay ISEA International, provide accommodation for the board, and put a General Meeting in the program, while they, the organisers, are doing all the work!

This is a major reason why it is hard to make progress in giving the series of symposia more direction. Since the nomadic character of ISEA is one of its major charms, changing the symposium is possibly one of the most difficult problems that ISEA faces; I would like to see a panel contribution that offers a possible solution.

On the other hand, the struggle to maintain a central contact point (HQ), and the problem of an ever-changing, over-sized board (which was a characteristic of the association, whose board, by definition, was elected by the members), are past us, and we can at last think about the improvements that are needed in the symposium.

In that direction, a major issue stands out in the panellists' statements: Some suggested discussing the possibility of making the choice between a truly academic conference, and a networking event where artists meet each other. Since the main motivation behind ISEA was the need for artists and scientists to meet and collaborate, this would be an impossible choice. However, as panellist Vicki Sowry rightly stated: "it is essential that research be undertaken to identify what is of value to which group of attendees and what the barriers/incentives to attend ISEA for each of these groups really are".

One thing we can conclude, even without the named research, is that the original academic pretensions are not met. Panel member Ernest Edmonds pointed out that, even though the (paper)

proposals and the final papers are double blind reviewed by a competent International Programming Committee, the Proceedings often appear only after the symposium. The problem here is that ISEA, with its extended exhibitions, concerts, performances, screenings and general events, is a much larger organisational structure than a standard academic conference. Besides that, there are strong objections, not only by the artistic community, to having people read their paper to an audience that might as well have stayed home and read the proceedings. Having final papers double reviewed and corrected would mean writing them far in advance of the symposium, thus causing actuality and spontaneity to suffer. However, if we want to be taken seriously by the academic community (and make it possible for academics to get funding to attend), it is essential that the Proceedings are published before the symposium. This would enable us to re-establish the co-operation that we previously had with Leonardo, as mentioned by panellist Ernest Edmonds and commentator Roger Malina. There would have to be rather strict rules for presenting the paper, as reading aloud must be avoided.

A number of the panellists (including Vicki Sowry and Roger Malina, among others) pointed to the funding problems that are often inherent in an international organisation. This also emerged as the most common problem when the organisations met at the Cartographies meeting in Montreal. If any organisation understands funding problems, it is ISEA International.

Let us be practical and state that funding issues may be the primary motivation in encouraging emergent art organisations to come together and discuss co-operation with industry, education, government, social services, health care and so on.

Now that I have again used the word 'emergent' instead of 'electronic' (and several panel members questioned the term 'electronic' in the name of the symposium, as have ISEA International board members), I would like to say a few (personal) words on that subject.

### The Name

ISEA was born at a time when the most important current developments were:

-computer graphics had reached a state of maturity,

-while electronic music had an even older history,  
-but the two worlds (graphics and music) were not connected  
-and it had become clear that new art forms (especially interactive) were possible

-while the traditional division of art disciplines had become obsolete and  
-last but not least, the personal computer had advanced in both everyday life and in art education.

The new element was clearly the computer and its introduction into the art world. In the course of the last 25 years the computer has become completely integrated into everyday life (at least in the West), whilst electronics have become integrated into the world around us, from the kitchen to the car. In addition, other technologies have developed in a spectacular way (mostly thanks to the underlying electronic revolution), such as biological and medical technology, nanotechnology and so on.

With these developments, isolation of electronics alone as the interesting new element in the arts has become problematic; in practice, the symposium nowadays focuses rather on the broader connection between 'modern technology' and art.

Especially given the current intersection of electronic technology and the life sciences, 'electronic art' does not cover the whole spectrum of what we at ISEA encompass.

However, I think that changing a name that has a (I hope) positive reputation is not wise. A new problem would arise: both press and public would wonder what 'emergent art' is. So, in practice, ISEA has become a symposium on emergent art, but so far without a change in the name. After all, the largest association in the Netherlands is called the General Dutch Bicyclists Association (ANWB), although today its membership consists of motorists not cyclists (the ANWB provides free assistance to stranded members); and I doubt Linz will change the name of its famed festival to *Ars Emergencia* because of a shift in philosophy.

### Conclusions of the Panel

Theses (*in italic*) that the panel debated and some conclusions drawn were:

#### PROCEEDINGS

-*Papers should be double blind reviewed, even when it means they will*

*not be published until after the symposium.*

The latter part of the thesis was dismissed: Universities need to be sure the contributions of their employees are published in serious Proceedings at the time the symposium takes place. During the symposium a Book of Abstracts should also be distributed. The published papers may help ISEA to be taken seriously by academic institutions. ISEA International should look into the possibility of taking the production and publication of the annual proceedings in their own hands - or find a partner, such as ISAST, to negotiate a structural cooperation on this endeavour.

## RESEARCH

*-We need to research what the barriers/incentives are to attending ISEA, not only of the current attendees (participants and community members), but also of potential attendees (especially scientists).* This research could radically affect the format of the symposium. A survey must become both an integral part of each ISEA symposium, and the basis for ISEA International as a learning organisation - a point that Anne Nigten stressed. From this survey, lessons will be able to be learned regarding the composition of the ISEA constituency, and how that composition might be influenced. It could also be instrumental in the fee-waiving policy that the symposium organisers are encouraged to practice. ISEA International should also investigate the possibilities of practice-based research, from symposium to symposium.

## GOALS

*-We need to formulate the long-term goal of ISEA.* I propose it should be 'a structured approach to the potentials of electronic (or emergent) art'. Original panellist Peter Beyls (who could not be present) formulated it as follows: "[ISEA's] emergent functionality [consists of] the synthesis of both material means and knowledge to foster the creative contribution to (electronic) culture in a global networked society". For this we will need cooperation on as large a scale as possible.

## STRATEGY

*-If we aim at getting emergent art institutes to cooperate and meet, what would be the best strategic plan?*

## SUGGESTIONS:

The term 'meta' should preferably not be used, as it has hierarchical connotations to many. We should use the term 'network organisation'.

"If ISEA regularly hosted the meeting that it always has been doing at SIGGRAPH, this time between representatives of organisations that happen to be there, then maybe coming out of these discussions some joint activity could emerge" (Roger Malina).

"Link with the other growing set of specialist meetings in the area" (Ernest Edmonds).

"Have partner events (...) especially those from science and technology fields". (Anne Nigten).

Look into the possibility of organising 'affiliated events' with ACM [4], and/or allow the organisation of ISEA to host affiliated events.

Negotiate with symposium organisers the inclusion of Institutional Presentations, BOF-meetings [5] and Meetings of Organisations & Institutes.

Other suggestions to further the goal via the symposia: "Special projects sponsored by ISEA International", "SIGs [6] within ISEA symposia", "New Topics Sessions", "Speakers from the Sciences and Technologies", "Publication of dialog between arts and technology" (Peter Anders).

Get more visibility by using social media, especially YouTube. Use YouTube to draw attention to Proceedings and Online Archive.

And, very obvious: start an active search for organisations for ISEA to cooperate with (SIGGRAPH, Computer Music Association, etc.)

## Conclusion

The need for an organisation-of-organisations has not diminished since ISEA's birth. This organisation should, however, not be called a meta-organisation, but rather an assembly, a union or - why not? - an inter-society. For ISEA, the word 'emergent' has become more relevant than 'electronic'; thus: Inter-Society for the Emergent Arts.

The opportunity to realise an inter-society may have substantially improved, and the road to get there is partially clear. This consists of ISEA International demanding certain policies from the future symposium hosts; it is up to ISEA International to formulate both these policies, and also a strategy for the longer term.

## References and Notes

1. Lamontagne (1995) magazine.ciac.ca/archives/no\_9/en/comptendu02.html. Accessed June 16, 2013.
2. [isea-web.org](http://isea-web.org) and [www.isea-webarchive.org](http://www.isea-webarchive.org).
3. [isea-web.org/symposia/how-to-bid/guidelines-jan-2013/](http://isea-web.org/symposia/how-to-bid/guidelines-jan-2013/).
4. ACM (Association of Computing Machinery) is the mother organisation of Siggraph, Sigchi and other annual academic conferences.
5. BOF: Birds of a Feather.
6. SIG: Special Interest Group.