

AHRC ICT Methods Network Student Bursary Awards

DRHA (Digital Resources for the Humanities and Arts) Conference Dartington College of Arts, 3 - 6 September 2006

CONFERENCE REPORT

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The bursary awarded me by the Methods Network enabled me to present a paper at DRHA 2006. The conference was also an invaluable opportunity for meeting new people, exchanging ideas, discovering what others are doing in the field of digital technology, and catching up with old friends.

The addition of the Arts to the 2006 programme of the DRHA, brought an extra dynamic to the conference that was both challenging and illuminating. Dartington College, the host institution, is renowned for challenge and innovation in its teaching of the arts and, as such, was the perfect venue for the conference.

Delegates were given a menu of thought-provoking keynote sessions, the themes of which, whilst diverse in content, contained several main threads that were interwoven throughout the conference: 'exploration' into the unknown; pushing the boundaries in the arts and humanities; new realities and changing aesthetics; perceptions of time, space, and self, all made possible through the use of new technologies.

In his introductory talk, Professor Richard Beacham examined the work of Adolphe Appia, the Swiss theatre designer, in the context of rebuilding the theatre in Hellerau, Germany where architecture and technology have fused with music and dance to become an exemplar of what it is possible to achieve in integrating various disciplines.

Professor Roy Ascott's keynote lecture led us on a journey from an iterative view of the world to new horizons offered by digital technology in which the, 'viewer is also the player.' From virtual reality to, 'stretching the media we employ'.

The final keynote lecture was given by Professor N. Katherine Hayles. Professor Hayles discussed relationships between tacit and explicit knowledge; the narrative in communication whether mediated by code or as held 'in place by memories'; how technology is pushing boundaries by changing aesthetics and creating a cultural shift in our perceptions.

The progression of technology's potential was demonstrated across the disciplines in the humanities and the arts, including performance and the performing arts. Collaborative research across national and international institutions featured strongly with an emphasis on innovative design and sustainable electronic resources for use mainly in the Higher Education sector.

Parallel sessions always pose a problem of choice. The addition of arts to the sessions added an even greater challenge than usual. The choices made by delegates appear to have been driven by professional interests, with all the humanities people attending one set of sessions and the arts another. It is to be hoped that future conferences will see greater integration across disciplines made possible by a schedule in which there is less session/discipline conflict.

The posters covered a wide range of completed projects and works in progress but unfortunately appeared to be divided in venue and subject between arts and works in progress, or technology and systems.

The final, and perhaps the most challenging activity of the conference was a video conference with Professor Stelarc in which he discussed his most recent project. The concept is that the bodily construct is an accident of design and can therefore, be reconstructed—in this case an ear implanted and grown on the forearm. Professor Stelarc talked us through the processes of his attempt to 'grow' this working ear, a process which has been halted (temporarily) because of an infected arm. This presentation divided the audience by raising such issues as, 'Is this art or self-mutilation?' and the ethical value of such 'works'. These questions, and the idea of the 'malleability' of the human body, brought the conference full circle from Professor Beacham's earlier discussion about ethics, art, and technology based on Appia's theories—that we must 'guard against technology getting the upper hand'. We must be vigilant in our pursuit of 'ethical values and judgement', and always strive for an 'aesthetic truth'.