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In this talk I shall reflect on my twenty years of ISEA. When I say ‘my,’ that is because this is a partial view. I have exhibited three times since 1990, given six papers, attended eleven, edited proceedings, been the UK ISEA rep, and published six reviews in journals, from Modern Painters, Mute. All through I have led a parallel existence as a painter. Previous to that I had started and edited Artscribe magazine in 1976, and on till 1983, which became the UK’s leading art magazine. I tried to bring these experiences together in a book entitled ‘Painting the Digital River: how an artist learned to love the computer’ published by Prentice Hall in the USA in 2006. So I am reporting back now as a visitor, participant, exhibitor, and commentator.

In the earlier days of ISEA we were looking ahead, and we imagined an epoch where art would go ‘digital’ wholesale: it would becomes disembodied from its physical shell, like the medieval soul breaking free from the corrupted flesh. In 1993 Roy Ascott called this moving from Nature 1 to Nature 2. ‘Traditional’ art forms were scheduled to mutate at the millennium. Exhibitions had titles like ‘the art of the future’. Many exhibits were unashamedly sci-fi - eerie robotics staged in dark rooms, panels that talked back to you and winked. Interactive, Multimedia, Virtual Reality – this was like a sneak preview.

But now I am struggling to activate technologies that feel a hundred years old. It is an uncanny feeling, delving into this retrospectively, since that futuristic, sci-fi, feel expressed a collective confidence in a technology that was pointing in a different direction. Some predicted something akin to our cell-phone wi-fi world, laptops, iPods, iPads, but we were thinking in terms of bulky contraptions, cumbersome VR helmets. There was no web as we now have it, and sending anything – a photo of the sky in New Zealand wafting through ‘cyberspace’ – was an event.

To retrieve that material - some installation shots - required scanning slides, recovering images from obsolete formats, and coming right up against the impermanence of so-called new media. Ironically, it is through obsolete media, books, objects – in my case paintings, prints – that I have to get back to recall how that futuristic time felt, and that was only twenty years ago.

Twenty years later, ten years after that millennium that now seems insignificant in comparison with 9/11, we look back on those predictions as symptoms of the time, when words like ‘hyper’, ‘cyber’, ‘wired’ had a neon glow. That future has been whisked away. (The past futurology of ISEA is a subject in itself). Now we talk of global warming, financial meltdown, Facebook and Al Qaida. Traditional art has retained its physical shell. Digital photography and websites are taken for granted as nothing special.

The ISEA events had a particular character in the early nineties – the installation shots show spectators like volunteers in an experiment, or worse, strapped into simulators. There was also more of a sense that the exhibition was an occasion, even if more or less conventional in terms of prints on the wall. Looking back there was much more of a shared aesthetic than was apparent at the time. There was a look, a crystalline multi-coloured world, a swirl of gaseous forms, everything burgeoning, nocturnal, and occasionally an imagined hi-tech Japan, or Blade Runner metropolis. What is not there are highly minimal forms, tastefulness, for example, or imposing figuration.

That so-called 2D art, or still image work - was well within the orbit of early ISEA. But gradually they were seen as marginal, old-fashioned, unexciting, and in effect excluded. This year there were no 2D pieces at all at SIGGRAPH. ISEA as a whole has always been ambivalent, even paranoid, about the perceived ‘art world’.

The process of retrieving material has demonstrated the transitory nature of media, or rather the impermanence of formats. But it is not just file formats, and CDs from 95 that don’t play; for example, a leading high-end computer graphics magazine I wrote 9 columns for in 96/97, CGI, according to the web, simply never existed. Reporting on the 1993 ISEA at Minneapolis, in the mainstream art magazine Modern Painters, I made the point – in the face of the prophetic talk of painting being supplanted by the dematerialized, interactive, virtual art proposed at ISEA (this was pre-web) – that the real question was whether the talent will migrate to electronic media. While full of enthusiasm for the new proposed forms, I was also sceptical, and in succeeding years in places as far apart as Helsinki, Chicago and Nagoya, I found myself entranced not by electronic art prototypes, but by the paintings in the museums. Looking back, the problem of reporting on this was to make it accessible to those outside the bubble. In effect it was as much a cult as a culture, thriving on its sense of being an exclusive avant-garde. Explaining the electronic part to the mainstream art audience, or the art part to the computer graphics tribe, was never going to be easy.

One obvious difference between the ISEA of that time and the 2009 was that the more ambitious connections with contemporary art have dropped away, and that certainly in the nineties there was a constant diatribe against the ‘art world’ and its vanity, and one way or another digital art was seen as the big solution. Jan Hoet, director of Documenta was the keynote speaker, fiercely debated, and there was a handful of mainstream composers, musicians and artists, (pencils and computers) but now the topics have shifted towards community projects, theorists, curators, who are just as valuable, of course, but the air of controversy has gone. (In passing this corresponds with a shift in art schools, with the growth of ‘art theory’, so that ideas have beome the centre, and visual experience has moved to the side.)

The topics discussed at the last Belfast ISEA had moved far from the preoccupations of the early ISEA meetings. Then ‘computer art’ was an isolated minority interest, somewhat at odds with the world at large. ISEA connected composers, animators as well as visual artists from all over the world. At the first ISEA I took part in, twenty years ago, the topics were 2D art, animation, electronic music, and artificial intelligence. The novel formats emerging were the CD Rom and multimedia; then came interactive, virtual reality, and of course the web. At the 2009 ISEA in Belfast the keynote speeches covered social or activist projects, design, and fashion. Papers featured collaborative projects, helping communities bond through cell phones. There were scare any 2D works on show, and the most attended sessions were on education. A first time visitor might have been puzzled that this was a conference on electronic art. ISEA was now set up for the academic theorist or the community arts team, as much as for the individual artist.

One comment one hears over the years is, doesn’t anyone realise there is a history here, and that project – interactive plant growing say – has been done many times before. Projects, so-called, have been documented, and placed in well-researched anthologies, but what is missing, perhaps, is a proper critique. Making a series of paintings, is not a project, cannot be funded as research, but if exhibited in anywhere prominent, is under instant scrutiny, comparison. (Moores and Siggraph).

Could we draw up a balance sheet over the past twenty years comparing what was promised, expected, to what we have? The obvious phenomenon that was only predicted on so to speak the fringe was what was then seen as ubiquitous computing. In short, the 93 ISEA thought of itself as a digital avant garde, artists armed with hi-tech leading the field. Now more or less everyone has an iPhone, laptop, is online, and there is nothing at all special about being an artist and using eBay. The second point, is the continuation, without so much a hiccup, of all those physical based media that were supposed to evaporate into virtual media at the stroke of midnight on Dec 31 1999. Like the millennium bug, virtual art sort of didn’t happen. Another balance sheet would set out what has been going on in mainstream art world, and the digital art world on the other side. And again, the digital side would look fragmented, without direction, or art stars. The routine explanation in the nineties was that it was too soon to form any conclusion, that time would tell, that this was an art if the future, in essence, and that all would be revealed in ten fifty years time.

However advanced the technology – we cannot now speak in those terms – there was also something primitive about the aesthetics: few seemed aware of the battles that had been fought over questions such as the social role of art, the validity of abstract painting, video, installation, the ironies of post-modernism. In some ways this innocence was refreshing. as if the out and out quest for a total illusion represented by virtual reality, or rather the promise of a complete sensaround experience, was art heaven; a short intro to the origins of twentieth century art would have helped dispel this idea; certainly, within painting, illusionism had been off the agenda for quite a while, and the game had always been to get the maximum effect from the minimum means, not the other way round.

The writing, reporting ISEA or Siggraph, and the book, had to communicate with a readership unfamiliar with the closed world of ISEA, or of electronic art in general. In CGI magazine, my role was to get the inside story, but the readership was mainly CG experts, or students with ambitions in animation, 3D, craving for a SGI machine. In Modern Painters, the readership was comfortable with contemporary art, but not with computer art. In the book, the readership was more general, unfamiliar with both contemporary art, and with CG, but somehow I had to tell a story that would make them interesting. I had in these cases to raise issues that were skipped over at conferences, ie the relevance, the quality of the art, its claims.

I would not want to say anything that suggests that as a category ‘painting’ offers a richer experience, or world,