

email interview with Christy Dena for RealTime july 2006

Describe your art(s) and how long you've been practicing for.

First off let me say that since the beginning of this year I no longer call myself an artist. This is a long story, too long for this interview, but in a nutshell I had been making art for 20 years and that's long enough. I have made vast quantities of work over that time, most of which remains unseen and unheard, first as a photographer, then as a video/installation artist, then in all forms of media new and old that are available to an artist : Image, text, sound, performance. I must say I am not fond of the term "New Media Artist". I have never considered myself a New Media Artist and I think it is a term fraught with problems. When I was an undergraduate at Sydney College of the Arts in the late eighties we were taught, you are not photographers, you are artists utilizing the photographic medium and this really pissed some people off but I found it very liberating and in the last half of my degree i didn't use photography at all. I worked with a video camera and began to explore computers. The most interesting people in that cohort, Simone Paterson, Ryszard Dabek, Raimond de Weerd, antmray, and others, all went on to have a very diverse practices, and essentially that was rooted in that very enlightened approach. Although I learned early on, not to think of myself as a photographer, but as an artist, ironically John Williams, who was still the head of Department when I started is one of the most important photographers Australia has produced, and you only have to look at the long list of people who were taught by him, Anne Zahalka, Debra Phillips and so on, who are amongst the most high profile Australian photographers and who have been instrumental in making Australian fine art photography well known and respected around the world, to understand his commitment to teaching.

When I started at SCA in 1988 John was on leave and he only came back for a semester, but we were very fortunate to be taught by people like Rebecca Cummins, the late great Mark Hinderaker and Martyn Jolly, who were then at the very beginning of their academic careers, and they had energy, ideas and enthusiasm in bucketloads. So we were very very fortunate I think.

Describe your role at your university.

I work in the School of Visual and Performing Arts at the Charles Sturt University Wagga campus. I am the coordinator of the BA Multimedia Arts, and I lecture in that programme, as well as in the BA (Photography) and the new BA (Animation and Visual Effects). I also supervise a number of postgraduate candidates in the Master of Visual and Performing Arts, the MA (Fine Arts)(Honours), PhD (Fine Arts) and the Doctorate in Creative Arts.

Why did you decide to go into education?

My work is not commercial enough to have a hope in hell of making a living from it. I don't enjoy cowering to arts bureaucrats in order to get grants, and I had some great teachers when I was at art school. So I had the idea that facilitating the learning and development of creative people would be fun.

How did you choose the department and institution you're in?

They chose me. In the early nineties I was a starving artist lurking around the School of Fine Art at the University of Newcastle, picking up bit of casual teaching here and there and completing a Graduate Diploma in Fine Art. As an artist I had a fairly high profile (working as Dan Zero) at that time, since I worked almost exclusively with interactive multimedia installations which was in its infancy then. I can't praise the Newcastle Department of Fine Art enough. The support and belief in my work of people like Miranda Lawry and Alan Chawner was priceless, but they couldn't offer me full time work. So when the Wagga people were looking for someone to teach Electronic Art and Multimedia in the BA Fine Art and they heard that I knew how to use Director and Netscape Gold 3.0 :), they invited me to come out for a chat. At that time Wagga wasn't the groovy happening place that it is now. There were trucks full of incontinent sheep thundering down the main street being taken to the abattoir, instead of genteel middle class people sipping café lattés on terraces, but it was when I saw the Macintosh 8100AV with 128MB of RAM with all the software you had ever dreamed about, which I could access 24 hours a day, that I signed on the dotted line. You'd be lucky to get \$20 for that machine now, but at the time it represented a \$12,000 investment. Such is the irony of "new media".

How has your experience as an educator and being in a university affected your practice?

The University has been very supportive of my practice over the years, and I was the second person to complete a PhD in Fine Arts there. There was no one there who understood anything about computers when I started. My supervisor Professor David Green is an embroiderer, although this is not actually as far removed from pixel pushing as you might think. But they were keen to embrace the creative possibilities of the digital medium and they asked me to write a dedicated undergraduate programme, which I did. This was a time of great optimism, but by the time we launched the course with an intake of 15 in 2000 the dot.com bubble had burst and this optimism about all things digital started evaporating soon after.

It was through my work at the University that I came into contact with people like Wagga artist Adam Bell and later, the independent Wagga based curator Sarah Last, and we became the backbone of the Wagga Space Program, organizers of the UnSound festival of experimental sound and music, which attracts all the big names in Australian experimental sound art, and which promises to be bigger and better than ever this year! Obviously in a relatively small city like Wagga the University is very important to the economy and the wider community, especially the arts community. People come to town to teach or study, make some sort of contribution for a while and then leave. But some people stay, and in a regional area this is immensely important.

What is different about a new media artist who is also an educator?

They have less time, a mortgage, and a worried frown.

Has your job ever conflicted with your artistic needs or ideas?

Constantly, on a daily basis. But not as much as working in a dog food factory would.

What do you notice about students and their learning practice in a university environment?

The user-pays system of tertiary education has gradually and subtly changed the students attitudes over the last decade and a half, as has the increasing numbers of private providers. Apart from anything else most students work part time and some full time, to support themselves and pay their own way. They are more and more becoming like clients, or consumers of educational products. My attitude is : I am not going to duplicate what you can learn in a For Dummies book. It is much more the critical aspect of a students development that I am interested in. Their ability to articulate their ideas. But students can be short sighted. Often things are judged on the basis of whether they perceive what they are learning as being useful for when they are looking for employment, and in a sense, under late capitalism, this is only natural. One student told me last year : It is your job to teach me this material, and I am not understanding it. So you are at fault. This is a fairly sad inditement of the system and how it has changed the whole learning and teaching processes. Add to that the kinds of pressures the Federal Government is exerting on Universities in terms of funding and quality assurance and as an academic you end up like a very thin slice of meat in a meagre sandwich. Unfortunately for the bean counters, quality in education resists being measured to any meaningful extent by exit surveys, graduation rates or attrition rates. A university should be a place where you can explore and experiment with creative practices and ideas. The outcomes may well be intangible, ephemeral, and may not be visible at all for years or decades. Sometimes a student comes back years and years later and report that there was one thing you said that they didn't understand at the time but which through the magic of what psychologists call latent learning, proved useful to them. How do you measure that in an exit survey?

What, if anything, in academia hinders the creative process for you (and maybe your students)?

Money. Cynicism. Money. Fear. Money. Laziness. Bureaucracy. Money. Bean counters.

What, if anything, in academia nurtures the creative process for you (and maybe your students)?

Well of course the role of the university has changed and is continuing to change a great deal. Some would say not for the better. Don't get me started. I, for one, lament the passing of the old system of independent art schools, before Dawkins came. Being forced to become part of a University has been tolerable for some,

and a disaster for others. Even institutions like my old alma mater, Sydney College of the Arts, who have been able to maintain a degree of independence, have been forced into a certain degree of compromise by the forces of economic rationalism. Every public tertiary institution in the country is extremely top heavy in management, and bottom heavy in administrative and support personnel. The academics, who are people who are actually at the coal face delivering that which all the students come to the universities for in increasing numbers are ironically the first to suffer when there are staff cuts and redundancies. The easiest way to save money is through casualization since the academic year is two thirteen week semesters and a couple of exam weeks. So you don't have to pay staff during non teaching time, whilst tenure is now meaningless anyway. This is disastrous for research, and can have a detrimental effect on the pedagogical process (see below). The academy is in serious trouble. The pressure is on to make courses more vocational. Time and space for reflection, criticism, experimentation is dwindling. Departments are closing. Permanent positions whittled away. This is a serious crisis and everyone is exhausted and cynical. Meanwhile for many staff there is little or no job security.

What, if anything, in academia hinders the new media arts pedagogical process for you (and maybe your students)?

See above. Also, I don't know whether there is a specific new media arts pedagogical process, or whether it is essentially any different from any other pedagogical process. Most students are more worried about finding employment than in developing their creativity, even though our industry research shows that most prospective employers are more interested in finding people to work for them who are flexible, who are problem solvers, who can apply creative ideas in a range of contexts, than in which version of the software they are familiar with. I guess what typifies an industry which relies so much on computers of one kind or another and software is that it is changing so rapidly. This is costly for an institution and difficult for academics who are more interested in outcomes and critical engagement than in the specifics of software when they are often forced to change their subject content, as new different better software becomes available. Take for example Director. Although many seriously interesting things can be done with Director, no one is really interested in that software now. Everyone wants to do Flash, even when something could be better accomplished in Director.

Now say if you are an expert on Shakespeare how much do your lecture notes change every year. Actually bad example because Shakespeare is hardly taught anymore, and Channel Nine are running programmes complaining that HSC students are being asked to interpret Shakespeare from a Marxist or feminist perspective. There is a reactionary tide in this country, and the world at large, which is more than a little depressing. So the pedagogical process is very simple : We are doing the best that we can with the little we've got left, and some of us try to be honest with the students about the challenges facing us.

What, if anything, in academia nurtures the new media arts pedagogical process you (and maybe your students)?

Well the coffee at the Union has got a lot better in recent years, but with VSU coming in they will probably go back to International Roast.

How can universities improve the teaching and learning of new media arts practice?

Do they wish to improve it? This seems too unlikely. If it could be done by making staff work harder for less money they would be very interested, but other than through casualization (casual staff are prepared to allow themselves to be exploited) there is not much fat left on the academic side. The Universities could make enormous savings on the management side but for obvious reasons this is much less likely to happen.

How can artists better utilise learning new media arts in universities?

I guess you have to make the distinction between learning how to use the technology, and the development of a critical discourse on these changing mediums, old new, in-between. If you just want to quickly learn new software don't go to a University. The options for developing your critical faculties in any tertiary context, and of course it is completely lacking in the private institutions that I know of, are rapidly diminishing, so my advice would be : Get it whilst you can. By the time that the free market forces have finished with our Universities they will be sausage factories.

What impression do you think your non-university new media artist colleagues have of what you do?

They think I've got it easy.

Do you think there is a difference in art created by educators and not?

Yes. No. Maybe. (Not an interesting question.)

Have you been exhibiting more, less or the same since your edu work? What factors do you think influence this state of affair?

Less is more.

What impact do you think your edu work has had on your artistic career?

It stuffed it. But I could afford to buy food, so I stayed alive. So I am happy about that at least.

What will you take with you from your experience in academia?

A lot. A mixture of good and bad.

Would you recommend educator work to another artist? If so or not, why?

I still think that, on the whole, working as an academic in a public tertiary institution has more positives than negatives at the present time, since most Universities are at least in theory, more or less supportive of the idea of artistic practice as research. But as I have indicated I am more than a little pessimistic of the mid to long term future of the sector, particularly from the point of view of regional institutions. It is anyone's guess what Brendan Nelson's legacy will be and what kind of half-arsed ideas the new federal education minister will come up with.

If we are talking about other education sectors, it becomes more complex. Everyone I know who teaches in TAFE wants to get out. I don't know many high school teachers, but of the ones I know they seem to be in an even more thankless and impossible position.

I am thinking of throwing it all in and becoming a school counsellor and trying to talk some of the young people out of committing suicide. This seems a much more important issue at the moment.

Anything else you'd like to add.

If I might just stress that all of the above reflects my personal opinion as an independent thinker, practitioner and academic, and does not reflect the official position of the University which employs me.