

## From ELECTRONIC SOCIAL CULTURE to DATA RECOVERY

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Electronic Social Culture [ESC] was a digital media exhibition and mentorship program which marked the culmination of a year-long project begun in May 2002 by the Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Centre A (Vancouver) in partnership with the South Asian Visual Arts Collective, SAVAC (Toronto). The primary objective of the project led by practicing artists Gu Xiong and myself was to support the development of new media art by young artists from different cultural communities in Canada. SAVAC Director, Rachel Kalpana James, and Centre A's Curator-in-Residence, Sadira Rodrigues, were closely involved in the coordination. In 2003, works from the mentorship program formed a traveling media exhibition entitled *ESC* which was inaugurated at Centre A in 2003 and then presented at Aspace Gallery in Toronto the following year. Participant artists in the ESC exhibition included 536 (Donato Mancini and Jeremy Turner), Neena Arora, Eliza Au, Shelly Bahl, Roselina Hung, Santichart Kusakulsomsak, Pravin Pillay, Sakun Samarakoon and Gary Wang .

The exhibition context is best articulated in the curatorial essay for Aspace written by Gu Xiong, Sadira Rodrigues and myself:

ESC is an exhibition of a select group of young Canadian artists from across Canada, exploring issues of change and transformation from the perspective of their own aesthetic cultural practice, in an effort to reach an understanding of their complex identities.

Canada is a place where different cultures are nurtured, attracting diverse people riding on the tide of immigration. From the first settlers, to the gold rush, railway construction and contemporary waves of global diasporas, immigrants from around the world made Canada their home and play an important role in mainstream culture. The collective effort of each generation's struggle contribute to a unique history. We come together bearing disparate experiences and points of view, but we learn to understand each other and celebrate multiplicity. This perspective of difference informs ideas about transculturation and globalisation. Not only are these dual phenomena linked to technology and new media, they are also integral to contemporary artistic production.

In a separate essay for the 2003 exhibition in Vancouver, I elaborated on the ESC curatorial premise further:

In coining the term *electronic social culture*, I would like to suggest that participation involving digital content and computer ownership expresses survival; whereas, modification of media suggests living. The artists who are participating in ESC have been activated by the digital media and are responding to it from a counter-cultural Diaspora.

This exhibition attempts to forecast future new media possibilities by addressing what would arise if electronic social culture was abandoned, altered, or used differently than it is at present. Would the mass fall into chaos without constraints as established by ESC? Would whatever resultant landscape or knowledge be left to ruination, fragmented beyond recovery to an irreducible archive of the past - incomprehensible? (<http://www.centrea.org/ESC/Essays/SylviaB.html>)

In this way the exhibition's validity and its assignment into the future was considered even as the work was being delivered for public launch. As a consequence, the concept of DATA RECOVERY arose as a counterpoint to this statement and as a metaphor of how to deconstruct a media exhibition from the recent past.

DATA RECOVERY is defined as the process by which digitized data whether through loss or damage becomes readable again. Often digitized data can become unreadable due to accidental erasure or through extreme physical shock to a computer hard drive.

The computer programmer definition of DATA RECOVERY paralleled the process by which the ESC exhibition was addressed. This process would involve the act of salvaging data and ideas borne from the digital mentorship which had become lost and seemingly irrelevant in time. The 'shock' for cultural programmers of the ESC show was time and new ideologies which had come after the final tour of the exhibition. Again questions about the exhibition's validity, its delivery mandates and the engagement of the artists in new media mentoring were solid platforms from which to question the show's context.

The idea of DATA RECOVERY also fits within the ESC mentorship program's original mandate. The mentorship program was devised to have a dual delivery role in which participants were both educated about new media technologies and aesthetic expression, as well as allowing them to become more knowledgeable about critically engaging and interpreting new media. A full or partial data recovery through interviews and engagement with the artists and curators would bring post-programming initiatives to full cycle and closure.

When the ESC mentorship project was launched, it was an anomaly amongst other gallery, visual and cultural initiatives. The mentorship program (2002-3) and exhibition (2003-04) moved far beyond being a socio-artistic experiment and provided a place where artists could talk about new media, learn how to apply these skills to their own practice, and have an extended dialogue with visual arts professionals. Thus at the conclusion of the ESC, a central question arose: Had participating artists gained and benefited through the new media and critical art mentorship? Was the theme of the exhibition and its deliverables dated or irrelevant to current media ideologies and visual arts programming?

Undertaking DATA RECOVERY three years after the inception of the project raised another key question: were the ESC artists still engaged in new media practice or involved in technological developments in the visual arts? This line of query became the subject of an on-line dialogue and chat I initiated with ESC artists to hear their thoughts and responses. Below is a summary of perspectives gathered during the summer of 2005 by three ESC participants: Donato Mancini, Pavin Pillay and Jeremy Turner. Though only a small sample from the original ESC group of artists, each of the participant's responses is telling of how media art is considered within contemporary practice and the social landscape of Canada.

Donato Mancini's response to new media learning re-addressed the fundamentals of the ESC project and its long-term outcomes. He states: "ESC was in some ways my introduction to screen media and digital interfaces in contemporary art. Since then I've watched these forms much more closely than I had before." Mancini goes on to offer a reflective overview about media criticality and development among artists and critics:

I still feel that too much new media art is unresolved, often built by basically layering multiple technological possibilities in novel ways without really integrating concepts. Some of the [media technology] skills required aren't out of reach of many artists, but a certain amount of fear remains around the technologies—fear that they're too difficult to master to be worthwhile trying to incorporate into a practice. This seems to result in a lot of new media work being produced by good technicians who are mediocre artists, or whose real interests are more technological than artistic. This is part of the reason many critics don't write about new media. New media is too often only that, "new media"; a technological novelty and toy fetish.

In contrast, Pravin Pillay's response seemingly underscores the very paradox underlying Mancini's comments: "New media art seems to resist being absorbed into the spectacle, the downside is that it is seen and engages mostly to "the converted" rather than to new audiences." For these ESC artists, the potential of media art still fits in the preconditions of 2003 where the lack of language, distribution and development within wider artistic communities seems to relegate new media to a niche audience.

Pillay also remarks on another area of concern, the socio-economic dimensions of new media technologies. For him, digital access ultimately shifts and transcends cultural territories and power structures. He writes:

Technology is something that comes with affluence. This is especially so with hi-tech. To this end it engages western audiences. But is expanding and as a homogenized global "techno-class emerges this will change especially in countries [like] India, China, and South Africa, where technology and wealth creation is seen as THE only way to the future.

While new media distribution and social empowerment remains in constant flux, digital computing and art seemed, according to the participants, caught in another uncertain tandem. All three correspondents highlighted the direct need to consider long term media exhibition preservation. Documentation, debate and interviews were outlined as suitable models in order to create living legacies and memories of what processes and artworks had been created earlier by media artists. None viewed their own creations developed for the ESC exhibition as a failure but as signs of what had been possible within a given socio-technological time frame.

Regarding the need for strong directives in terms of media preservation, Jeremy Turner writes:

From an archival and curatorial point of view, it is absolutely essential [to speak and write about new media] if we want this kind of work to survive past a possible Atlantean fate. Having constant and real-time surveys is the only way a museum culture can keep up with the ever-changing pace of technologically accelerated returns. Moore's Law says that all technologies (media) doubles in the level of obsolescence every 18 months...I would say the same for New Media cultural paradigms. Every strategy for codifying and collecting the residue of a New Media artwork can become historically obsolete every 18 months. As 21<sup>st</sup> century curators and Archivists looking back on this material, one needs to interface with these artists in real-time..... while they are still alive.

Further to the issue of distribution and immediate documentation, Mancini emphasizes that "a lot of new media work potentially has the advantage of wide distribution through the net. This should be encouraged as much as possible." Also a talented writer, with a book launch at the end of September, Mancini confirms the benefits of the ESC mentorship through his views on his latest project:

I'm currently working on a big web-curatorial project for the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW), transferring large selections of the group's audio archives into web-ready formats...It turns out digital audio ...is really one of the most important means for distributing poetry....Because ...[Internet] distribution can work against obscurity of writers and against regionalisms, it will eventually have a major impact on how poetry is written and on how the communities of writers relate to each other.....My work with ESC certainly helped ...

While issues of preservation naturally came up in the process of DATA RECOVERY, Pillay wrote of how the project engaged and defined him in unexpected ways:

I realize that I have more in common with a Tibetan Buddhist selling cultural trinkets, a young student in religious studies living in Saskatoon and an 80-something silent monk in California than with most of my Indian relatives in South Africa. I am still bound by blood and memory, but it is doubtful that my son will be linked to the sense of Indian and South African identity that I hold. The movement of culture through space and time is losing its ethnic boundaries and moving towards one of a culture bound by 'like-mindedness'. It seems to me that this 'likemindedness' is the type of culture being engendered by the net, whether that be porn, techno-gizmos, books, political viewpoints or spiritual awareness.

For Pillay, the process of DATA RECOVERY provided a platform from which to write about how common delivery schemes like the Internet create consensus of information and ideas rather than difference.

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With respect to my own post-exhibition responses, my experience with new media curation and DATA RECOVERY has evolved since the ESC exhibition. I continue to research and explore differences in digital art creation according to geographic location and computer exposure. Since 2003, I have directed *Digital Visions*, a partnership of curators and international artists addressing emerging definitions of Net Art. Through an interview format, process? artists are specifically asked to comment on their relationships between their elected media platform, their own ideologies, and location. This on-going curatorial project included a series of interviews with Taiwanese artists introduced to me by 2004 Taipei Biennale co-curator Amy Cheng on the question of how the civil histories of Taiwan impacted media development and individual artistic expression in their homeland. The project garnered enough interest that Taiwanese cultural ministries are considering a similar model of 'data recovery' and display in order to foster a wider audience for Taiwanese media artists within Taiwan and abroad.

From my experiences in leading the ESC project to developing the *Digital Visions* project, I have greatly expanded my understanding of how the terms 'community', 'artistic process' and 'exhibition' define the successful parameters of a project. In 2003, I had addressed these thoughts about the ESC project and artist's role primarily in relation to computer platforms without considering how these might impact future communities. At the time, I had expressed that:

Being alive does not mean living but surviving. To assert presence means to assert identity in the electronic social landscape: this involves the participation, ownership and ability of persons to navigate and/or efficiently use computer hardware and/or software to conduct tasks, express ideas or search for new content or territories via digitized media platforms.

I would like to take this opportunity provided through the DATA RECOVERY of the ESC project to re-address these terms and add to these thoughts:

To assert presence involves the participation of an audience and community group from which the artist resides. Without the acknowledgement of a viewing audience, an artist's work or an exhibition may fall into obscurity. The process of engagement, dialogue, and cataloguing of an exhibition, its participating artists and reviews, as well as criticisms from the past to present about the program are necessary assignments which galleries and/or the cultural sector need to manage in order to create long-term legacies of developed projects.

The resonance, particularly in regard to a media-driven exhibition, should not be solely contingent on its temporary presentation in a given moment. Importantly, it should build on its post-program delivery and legacy. If the 'code' or 'matrix' of the exhibition is not recorded from photo-documents, oral and written interviews, print catalogues or related media ephemera, the intellectual framing and concept deliveries tied to the exhibition, as well as to the artists, quickly fade in proportion to how long ago the work was shown and where it was displayed. This factor is true of the ESC project, only three of the eight participating artists could be reached and directly interviewed.

Since new media exhibitions are often costly to re-stage and difficult to re-interpret from equipment to curatorial decisions, data recovery strategies should happen more succinctly in time before artists move to other projects, geographies and onto events. Without a description of the processes involved in the creative production, future generations are left literally to fill in the analytical gaps. At the 2005 New Forms Festival in Vancouver a similar question arose when an Algonquin artist stated that in her native language the word 'art' does not exist. Instead artworks are described by their processes and its ties to community engagement and definition.

Upon hearing this, I realized new media art continues to need DATA RECOVERY and evolving community definition. Proper 'post-programming' or exhibition data recovery can keep past histories alive and in so doing form the basis for future narratives and new media outcomes.

In conclusion, the ability to engage with at least some of the ESC exhibition participants about their past and current experiences has created a solid archive relating to the experiences and functionality of new media art within Canada and internationally. The resulting dialogue has illustrated sentiments and ideologies about media based arts which would have otherwise been lost. It is hoped that this presentation will stimulate further recollections. Data recovery, a process which is integral to computer back-up, should similarly be considered as an essential step in maintaining the wealth of assets and information which accumulate from the staging of a media art exhibition.

Just like computer programmers use a master back-up at least several times a year, cultural programmers should apply the same archiving process of their own content for review and posterity.

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Thanks to all the artists and collaborators of the ESC project:

#### ARTISTS

Donato Mancini (Vancouver), artist and writer currently working on the Kootney School of Writing digital-audio archive

Jeremy Turner (Vancouver), new media artist and coordinator of LIVE2005 Biennale of Performance Art

Eliza Au (Vancouver), visual artist

Neena Arora (New York), interdisciplinary media-based artist

Shelly Bahl (Toronto), visual artist and Director of SAVAC

Roselina Hung (London), MFA graduate, Royal College of Arts, UK

Santichart Kusakulsomsak (Thailand), visual artist

Pravin Pillay (Saskatoon), graduate student in media arts

Sakun Samarkoon (Vancouver), visual artist and guest contributor to CBC ZED

Gary Wang (Vancouver), liberal arts graduate student at UBC

#### CURATORS

Sylvia Grace Borda (Vancouver), media artist and associate researcher and lecturer in Digital Arts at the University of British Columbia and Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design + Media

Gu Xiong (Vancouver), visual artist and Professor in Studio Arts at the University of British Columbia

#### COORDINATORS

Rachel Kalpana James, former SAVAC Director, now graduate student at Goldsmith's College, University of London

Sadira Rodrigues, Centre A Curator-in-Residence (2001-3), now Program Manager for Legacies of BC, Olympic Committee Office for the Arts 2010.

Original ESC exhibition catalogue can be referenced on-line at <http://www.centrea.org/ESC/Start.html>

#### POSTSCRIPT

In the 2003-2004 SAVAC Annual Awards, the Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art (Centre A) was honoured as the Most Successful Collaborator for their partnership with SAVAC on the [ESC] Electronic Social Culture project. The ESC exhibition was presented May 9-June 8, 2003, at Centre A in Vancouver (SAVAC's first national exhibition) and June 24-July 31, 2004, at Aspace Gallery in Toronto (SAVAC's first traveling exhibition).

Sylvia Grace Borda, MFA, is an Associate Professor in Digital Visual Arts at Emily Carr Institute (<http://www.eciad.ca>) and an Associate Researcher and Lecturer at UBC in Vancouver. She is a contemporary practicing media artist and theorist with research interests in convergent platforms, new media curation, and electronic preservation. Borda currently divides her time between Canada and Scotland, after being awarded the first international new media artist research residency offered by the East Kilbride Arts Centre (Scotland). Further to this role, she was the invited guest curator for "Graduate Contours", a series of exhibitions that profile fine art graduate students from across Scottish universities, including Glasgow School of Art.

Recent work involves the inauguration of the Virtual Museums of Canada net art portal with her project "Every Bus Stop in Surrey, BC." Borda also launched the net art portal for SAW Gallery (Ottawa) in 2004 and has had exhibitions at Dazibao Gallery (Montreal), Eslite Vision Art Space (Taipei), Museum of Contemporary Art (Zagreb), and California Museum of Photography. Additionally, Borda has delivered a series of new media papers at the National Research Council (NRC-Canada), UCLA, and conferences such as Museums and the Web, and Museum Computer Network. Her current digital art research will be featured in the next issue of Canadian Architecture.

Borda also manages a partnership of new media curators and international artists addressing the definition of Net Art, and was co-curator and mentor to artists participating in the Electronic Social Culture [ESC] exhibition. Website: [http:// www.sylviagracedborda.com](http://www.sylviagracedborda.com)

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