

ISEA Symposia in Australia: Past, Present and Future (1992, 2013 & 2024)

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Abstract

The theme of ISEA2024, *Everywhen* draws its inspiration from the traditional Australian indigenous perspective that past, present, and future coexist and are embedded in a specific location. ISEA2024 marks the third instance of the symposium being hosted in Australia - TISEA (1992), ISEA2013, and ISEA2024. In this short paper, ISEA archivists respond to the *Everywhen* theme by investigating the evolution of the field of electronic arts over time by looking carefully at the presentation, art and workshop content and formats at the three symposia in Australia.

Keywords

ISEA, International Symposium on Electronic Art, archive, symposium, preservation, repository, electronic art, new media art, Australia

Introduction

Since 2006, the ISEA Symposium Archives team has progressively created and improved various versions of its online repositories to preserve and store the digital records of the ISEA Symposium series. The First International Symposium on Electronic Art (FISEA) was held in Utrecht, Netherlands in 1988, and ISEA2024 is to be held in Brisbane, Australia, marking the 29th occurrence. The ISEA symposium has been held on 6 continents over the past 36 years. The presentations, artworks, and workshops at the symposium address a wide range of topics at the intersection of art, technology, science, and culture.

The ISEA Symposium Archives document the works presented at the symposium, including papers, panels, roundtable discussions, workshops, art exhibitions, performances, and cultural events. This online archive is publicly available and serves as a resource to investigate the evolution of new media art and related topics over the years. Given that ISEA2024 marks the third occurrence of the symposium in Australia, this short paper will focus on the archival materials from 1992, 2013, and 2024 and comment on the similarities and differences and the evolution of the field of electronic arts.

The theme of ISEA2024 in Meanjin (Brisbane), Australia, is *Everywhen* (see Figure 1), which explores the

concept of human perception of timescales. This concept challenges contemporary Western civilisation's understanding of past, present, and future. The theme of *Everywhen* states that the past, present, and future co-exist simultaneously in a single place. [1] This alternate view offers a great opportunity to connect the dots and delve into the interconnectedness of time and place in relation to the history of the three Australian ISEA symposia. The uniting of creativity and intellectual thought in both time and space is evident as we explore the presentations, exhibitions, and workshops of these three symposia.



Figure 1. ISEA2024 Brisbane, EveryWhen

Time and Place

The 3rd occurrence in the ISEA Symposium series (TISEA in 1992) and the 19th (ISEA2013) took place in Sydney, Australia (see Figure 2) [2][3]. They were both organised by the Australian Network for Art & Technology (ANAT). With a span of 21 years between these two symposia, the changes that occurred in both the creative and academic content presented at the symposia are evident when one examines the archive. ISEA2024 was organised by the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, and 11 years have passed since the previous time ISEA was held in Australia. The move from Sydney to Brisbane offers ISEA attendees a new landscape to explore. Yet, many of the same questions plaguing the electronic arts field are as relevant today as they were in 1992 and 2013.



Figure 2. TISEA (3rd International Symposium on Electronic Art, 1992) Still from Animated Intro by Jon McCormack [4] and ISEA2013 Selected Video Documentation. [5]

Thematic Approaches

In 1992, TISEA questioned technological utopianism and critically evaluated the role and effect of new technologies on contemporary art and culture. TISEA organisers explored the concepts of cultural diversity in the global village and art's relationship to cyberculture. In 2013, ISEA recognised technology as a central part of global culture and ubiquitous. The theme "Resistance is Futile" acknowledges that the global culture relied heavily on electronic technology. ISEA2024 refocuses the conversation to ask the participant to reexamine the concept of time and place, questioning the notion of decentralised networked culture and asking the participant to re-consider their understanding of "local" and "place".

All occurrences of ISEA in Australia question how technology affects cultural identity and its implications for life. These symposia facilitated dialogue about the ramifications of the virtual blending into the real and how environments are mediated, augmented, and transformed through technology. Ross Harley, in his opening statement in the TISEA Proceedings stated, "These papers take a critical position in relation to the technological utopianism that often surrounds popular and industrial discussions of new technologies." [6] The issue of globalisation was of great concern in 1994, whereas it had already become a cornerstone of life in 2013. ISEA2024 states: "In a time of globalisation, how can we value where we are and make art that connects through time." [7]

In 2024, the theme focuses on indigenous ways of knowing and how technology plays a role. Different from the Western perception of linear time progression, the indigenous culture suggests that past, present, and future exist simultaneously in a given location. It is believed that "all creation was made and manifested in the landscape; that all stories, art, song, dance, imaginative thought, creative inspiration, technology or invention was made complete in the time before time..." [1]

ISEA1992 questions the ethical aspects of technologies on indigenous cultures. "On the one hand, it represents a new set of possibilities where the problems of the past don't necessarily have to be repeated. On the other hand, Western technological culture has an incredibly bad track record when it comes to respect and genuine understanding of cultures." Ross Harley, the symposium organiser, poses the question, "Can the use of technologies present new opportunities without destroying the traditions that sustain older cultures?" [8] In 2013, indigenous people were welcomed, honoured, and celebrated, but the overarching theme and subthemes of the symposium did not mention these cultures.

The question of past, present, and future is addressed in various ways by the three symposia. In 1992, the focus was on the future. The symposium theme questioned the ethical ramifications of a potential future where technology is embedded in culture. In 2013, the imagined future of 1992 is the present, and resistance is futile. ISEA2024 acknowledges our present state in a rapidly changing world but asks us to consider the merger of past, present, and future into the places we inhabit.

Comparisons

The presentation topics differed from year to year, partly due to the thematic direction of the symposium and a reflection of the times. We noticed many similarities and differences in the thematic focus by analysing the titles and abstracts of the three ISEAs' presentations [1][2][3].

In TISEA, the 63 presentations included topics on the:

- Integration of Technology in Cultural Expression
- Indigenous Rights and Cultural Preservation
- Role of Virtual Reality (VR) and Digital Media in Expanding Artistic Expression
- Cyberculture's Influence on Artistic and Cultural Practices
- Globalization versus Cultural Integrity
- Humanity's Relationship with Technology
- Ethics and Originality in Digital Art
- Interactivity, Engagement, and User Experience
- Cultural Diversity and Technological Access
- Critical Reflections on the Role of Technology

In terms of the technological focus, there was an emphasis on the technology of virtual reality and immersive environments, alongside discussions on computer graphics, digital media, interactive media, etc.

In ISEA2013, the theme of the 250 presentations included:

- Cybernetics and Interactive Systems
- Digital Art and Its Social Context
- Augmented Reality (AR) and VR
- Sound and Music Technology
- Environmental and Ecological Engagements
- Historical Perspectives and Memory
- Cultural and Urban Interventions
- Participation and Community Engagement
- Technological Critique and Speculation
- Artistic and Scientific Collaboration

With 21 years between TISEA and ISEA2013, a number of new technologies became publicly available, include motion capture, augmented reality, haptic and wearable technology, electroencephalograph (EGG), smartphones and mobile devices, locative and GPS technologies, social media and online platforms, drones and surveillance technologies, etc.

Building on the success of the previous years, ISEA2024 had 350 presentations that covered topics including:

- AR and VR in Artistic Practice
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Creative Practices
- Environmental & Ecological Explorations through Art
- Digital Interactivity and Participatory Art
- Digital Narratives and Storytelling
- Technological Mediation of Body and Perception
- Ethics, Privacy, and Surveillance in Digital Culture
- Sound Art and Sonification
- Experimental Game Design and Digital Play

In 2024, there is a notable increase in the mention of AR and VR, alongside discussions on AI and Machine Learning. Other emerging topics include Blockchain and Cryptocurrencies, the Internet of Things, Generative Art, Game Engines, etc. Despite the thematic differences of the presentations over the years, the overarching focus of the three symposia remained the same - the interconnection of art, technology, science, and culture.

When assessing the types of artworks presented at the various symposia, we noticed a transition away from 2D artworks to more installation-based works. The 1992 ISEA Art Gallery exhibited works on the wall in frames as well as on the monitor, and CD-ROM-based interactive work was new and exciting at the time. The interest in 3 dimensional, virtual spaces prevailed even in 1992. *De Profundis*, an artwork by Philippe Boissonnet, explored the ambiguity of holographic space and how it symbolised the intermediate merging of time and space. [9] In 2013, Paula Dawson showcased her works entitled *HOLOSHOP: Drawing and Perceiving in Depth*. This exhibition reflected Paula Dawson's exploration of the effects of spatial and temporal imagery on human consciousness and perception. [10] In 1992, there was a notable emphasis on the emergence of VR technology and immersive environments and in 2013, VR was beginning to become available to artists. At ISEA2024, it is apparent that VR has become a widely utilised artistic medium.

In 1992, the Electronic Theater showcased cutting-edge animations and video art in Sydney's Domain Theater of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. In contrast, the animations at ISEA2013 were distributed across several venues. Ryoji Ikeda's *Test Patterns* was presented as an installation artwork, and *Datamatics 2.0* was performed live. [11] The number of venues displaying artworks and animations expanded exponentially over the years and included works displayed at associated events.

Evening performances and concerts were consistently a major component of the overall ISEA experience, with 11 dance, music, and art events in 1992 and 15 performances in 2013. In these events, we see the technologically-enhanced body as one of the highlighted themes, transcending time and place. In TISEA, an example is *Host Body/Coupled Gestures* by Stelarc, which explores "how electronic systems can extend performance parameters and how the body copes with the complexity of controlling information". [12] In 2013, *Body Fluid II (redux)*, by John A. Douglas, was a "performance and video installation in which the artist presented the monotony of his daily dialysis treatment as a sublime act of self-transformation". [13]

The number of workshops held at the symposia increased over time, and the content evolved as well. In 1992, workshops such as the *Introduction to the Softimage Animation Software* [14], and *Our Digital Future: Multi/Media and CD-ROM* [15] reflected the technological interests at the time. These media-based tutorials differ from the thematic 2013 workshops with titles such as *Global Mind Field: A Cybernetic Perspective* [16], *Sensing Sydney: City Data Slam Workshop* [17] and *EBEMU: Experimental Body Extension Manufacturing Unit* [18].

TISEA did offer conceptually themed workshops such as Nancy Patterson's *Being in Nothingness: Virtual Reality in Perspective* [19] and Anna Couey's *Constructing Cybercultures* [20], but the primary purpose of the workshops in 1992 was to enhance knowledge of contemporary technology.

Format of the Symposia

When comparing the three symposia held in Australia, it becomes evident that there has been an expansion in the number of presentations, exhibited artworks, workshops, and the duration of the symposium [1][2][3]. ISEA is now rarely held in a single location and is often co-located with associated events. In 1992, no associated events were mentioned, but in 2013, ISEA cooperated with 10 different technology and art-related events organized by others in Sydney. For instance, *VIVID* [21], the "annual festival of light, music and ideas", took place along the harbour near the Sydney Opera House, and the *Vivid Ideas Exchange* [21] featured public talks and debates from leading global creative thinkers. *Balance-Unbalance 2013*, an international conference that uses art as a catalyst to explore intersections between nature, science, technology and society, provided a platform for ISEA attendees to reflection, debate, and exchange ideas related to the unprecedented ecological threat to the planet [22]. Based on the current programme overview of ISEA2024, this year's symposium will continue this trend by offering a packed schedule with diverse associated events spanning the 10-day symposium duration.

Conclusion

In response to the 'Everywhen' theme, the ISEA archivists have delved into the evolution of ISEA symposia in Australia across three instances: TISEA (1992), ISEA2013, and ISEA2024, with the goal of comparing and contrasting the content. ISEA's journey from the past to the present and its potential futures have merged with the landscape Down Under. All time is accessible at every point. In alignment with this notion, the ISEA Symposium Archives' online repositories serve as a spatial and temporal meeting point, offering access to ISEA's past and present identity. It also provides insight into its potential future. Analysis of the three ISEA symposia in Australia reveals significant changes in the field of new media art. Despite these technological and thematic developments, ISEA's main focus remains unchanged. Throughout its 36 years of existence, ISEA has served as a unique international platform to share and engage in critical discourse on the intersection of art, technology, science, and culture.

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Bonnie Mitchell is a new media artist and Professor at Bowling Green State University in Digital Arts, in Bowling Green, Ohio, USA. Mitchell is a member of the ISEA International Advisory Committee and ACM SIGGRAPH History and Digital Arts Committee where she focuses on the development of their online archives. Her current creative practice focuses on development of physically immersive data visualization environments that showcase climate change over time.

Jan Searleman taught Computer Science at Clarkson University for 37 years, retired in 2015, and since retirement is an Adjunct Research Professor at Clarkson. Her research areas are Virtual Environments, Human-Computer Interaction, and Artificial Intelligence. A senior member of the ACM, Jan is co-director of the ACM SIGGRAPH History Archive with Bonnie Mitchell. She also co-directs the ISEA Symposium Archives with Bonnie Mitchell, Wim van der Plas, and Terry C.W. Wong.