The following essays are based on papers from the panel discussion “Media Art Histories: Times and Landscapes II,” that took place at “REFRESH! The First International Conference on the Histories of Media Art, Science and Technology” [1]. Although conference participant Tim Druckrey noted that over the past decade he had attended several “first conferences on the history of media art,” I know of no prior event that focused specifically on art-historical scholarship; thus I consider REFRESH! a potentially significant turning point. Many publications, in addition to the ones presented here, will be generated from its panels, and a second such conference, entitled “RE(PLACE),” was held in Berlin in November 2007.

The call for proposals for the Media Art Histories panel was intended to provoke and stimulate scholarship specifically on the historiography of art and technology:

Although there has been important scholarship on art and technology, there is no comprehensive technological history of art, as there are feminist and Marxist histories of art, for example. What similarities and differences, continuities and discontinuities can be mapped onto the use of technology for artistic purposes throughout the history of art? Why are there periods of fervent activity and others of apparent dormancy? Much of the best historical, critical and theoretical English language literature in the field thus far has been written by artists or by scholars in other disciplines. What is the voice of art history? What unique and valuable contributions has this discipline made? What further contributions can it make now and in the future, not only to art history but within a broader cultural framework? In order to begin charting a clear research agenda, the extant literature on the subject, broadly construed, must be subject to critical and systematic study. This panel seeks to take account of the field as it exists in order to better comprehend our foundations, understand the reception of scholarship in our field at various places and moments, and gain perspective on its place within larger historiographical concerns.

Co-chair Charlie Gere and I identified a remarkable concentration of submissions that sought to understand why the art-and-technology movement of the 1960s had been marginalized in canonical art-historical discourses. We decided to shift the thematic focus of the panel in order to capitalize on this serendipitous confluence of research activity. As a result, the papers, albeit from diverse perspectives, are mutually reinforcing and collectively offer a depth of inquiry on a relatively coherent topic. The three papers selected for this special section address the problematic reception and marginalization of art and technology in the U.S.A. (Anne Collins Goodyear) and the former Yugoslavia (Darko Fritz) in the 1960s [2] and the absence of research on non-artists, such as British cybernetician Gordon Pask (María Fernández), thus filling in important gaps in scholarship in the field.

The paucity of historiographical proposals made to the panel leads me to ask why this topic is not of particular interest to scholars. More research in this area would undoubtedly provide a valuable asset to current and future researchers as they evaluate and understand their intellectual heritage. Despite the growing literature on the entwined histories of art, science and technology (AST), Linda Dalrymple Henderson’s “Writing Modern Art and Science” [3] is, to my knowledge, the only historiographical study of the AST literature, perhaps because relatively little art-historical attention has focused on the field in general.

While the development and use of science and technology by artists always has been an integral part of the art-making process, the canon of Western art history has not placed sufficient emphasis on the centrality of science and technology as co-conspirators, ideational
sources or artistic media. As a result, many of the artists, artworks, aesthetic theories, institutions and events that are key monuments of the history of AST remain relatively unknown to general audiences. The REFRESH! and (RE)PLACE conferences and the scholarship generated by them, it is hoped, will help correct this oversight [4].

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References and Notes

1. The conference was held at the Banff New Media Institute, 28 September–1 October 2005.


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