The Dutch Foundation for Creative Computer Applications (in Dutch: the SCCA) had been active in the 80ties in introducing the computer into the curriculum of Dutch art schools. Then it decided to broaden its vision: it wanted to bring together the different traditional art disciplines, because the computer would be helpful in bringing about unique co-operations and unique new art forms. Secondly it decided to go international.

Trigger behind these activities was the notion that art and science should compliment each other and that the gap between the two was a threat to our future. The field of electronic technology seemed the place were artists couldn't do without the scientists, so co-operation was inevitable.

The founders of the SCCA, Theodor Hesper (computer scientist) and Wim van der Plas (sociologist), started to work on an "International Conference on Electronic Art", to take place in 1986. It was too optimistic and the starting year soon became 1988. Besides, 'Conference' was changed into 'Symposium', because it sounded better. The Rotterdam based SCCA started a co-operation with the Utrecht School of Arts and the symposium (FISEA, First International Symposium on Electronic Art) took place in Utrecht in September 1988.

There were a few hundred people, mainly from Europe, the USA and Australia. Many of them came either from the world of computer graphics or from the world of computer music. At this first ISEA they learned from each other they were experimenting with the same software (for example fractals), without knowing of each other's work. Remember that there was no WWW at that time and internet only in use at universities. I remember receiving my first email ever, handed out to me as a printed hard copy by our systems manager.

Among other, we had in our Program Committee pioneers like Charles Csuri, Herbert Franke and Iannis Xenakis. Speakers included other pioneers like Lillian Schwartz and Harold Cohen. At night there were music performances and a special session in the Omnimax Theater in The Hague. A selection of the best papers appeared (as Symposium Proceedings) in a special issue of Leonardo, called 'Electronic Art'.

The most important event at the first ISEA was the General Meeting (since then a tradition at each ISEA), where it was decided to found a 'meta organisation', called Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts. It wanted to further co-operation between the different institutes that existed in the fields of computer generated or computer aided art, in order to start working on its progress in a systematic and structural way. Secondly it was decided that a second symposium ought to be organised – in other words make it a series. The Utrecht Art School volunteered to take the organisation upon itself.

That, however, did not happen. After about half a year I was told that the Utrecht Art School was not going to be able to pull it off and I was asked whether I could take over. I then worked for the Art School Minerva, in Groningen, in the north of the Netherlands. Minerva and the Groningen Music Conservatory took it upon themselves to organise the second symposium (SISEA) in 1990 in Groningen.

Among the highlights were several performances by the Australian artist Stelarc. Also, there was quite a delegation from Australia, that proposed to organise the third symposium (TISEA) in 1992 in Sydney. The Sydney symposium was larger than the first two and the start of a truly nomadic existence of the ISEA Symposium. It went, respectively, to Minneapolis, Helsinki, Montreal, Rotterdam, Chicago, Liverpool/Manchester, Nagoya, Paris, Helsinki/Tallinn/Baltic Sea (actually part of that ISEA took place on a cruise ship), San Jose (USA), Singapore, Belfast, Ruhr Area (Germany), Istanbul, Albuquerque (USA).

The Inter-Society existed as a membership organisation from 1990 to 2008, when it was decided that a membership organisation is not the most practical way for making sure the

symposia are continued and make it even harder to find structural funding (which the organisation ISEA never managed to get). So, after consulting the membership the new foundation ISEA International took over. The idea of a meta-organisation went to sleep, together with the Inter-Society. However, at the last ISEA (in Albuquerque), there were signs that the whole idea was introduced too early and maybe now the time is right to try again. Thus, there will be a panel on this subject (Reviving the Inter-Society?) at ISEA2013.

The ISEA organisation has lead a difficult life, as can be gathered from the above, even though the symposia became more and more successful. It depended on volunteers for a long time, except for a period in the late 90ties and early 2000's when there was support from the Daniel Langois Foundation in Canada and our HQ (as we call it) was based in Montreal. Since a couple of years the ISEA foundation is supported by the University of Brighton, where Sue Gollifer heads the HQ.

Remains your question:
why it was important to start a symposium solely dedicated to electronic arts and why it is still relevant in a contemporary society in which everyone uses computers and smartphones etc

Part of that I explained in the beginning of the story above. 'Electronic art' may, nowadays, be replaced by 'emergent art', as not all progress in science and technology has to do with electronics and, more precisely, we start seeing a fusion of biology and technology that is of much interest to artists too. For examples of what I mean see the work of Stelarc (artist) and the American Ray Kurzweil (scientist), among many others. (Another Australian artist, Jon McCormack does interesting and relevant work in the field of Genetic Algoritms, as does the American Karl Sims).
The main point is that if one is interested in more co-operation between art and science, this is the field were those 2 major cultural disciplines need each other. Another, related, point is that our culture becomes more and more 'electronised', and there is now a gap between that and what policy makers understand. Politics is running headlong behind these technological developments. There are funny (and less funny) examples of how that can go wrong. Artists are keeping a very critical watch on this.
And last but not least: a future as described by (.f.e.) Ray Kurzweil, who believes we will soon be able to inject nanobots in our bloodstream, scares a lot of people. Bill Joy (of SUN Computers and inventor of the programming language Java), has even made a call to scientists to abstain from more research into such areas! Personally I find much relief in listening to Stelarc, who has always kept an open eye for a future where biology and technology will be much more integrated, to the point of a ´revolution in evolution´ (is how I like to call it) and invites us to embrace it, rather than fight it.

Some URL's referring to this last part:
Stelarc.org
kurzweilai.net
ted.com/speakers/bill_joy.html
diotima.infotech.monash.edu.au/~jonmc/sa/
karlsims.com

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