Artists Engaging with New Technologies

Artists today have a greater range of creative options than at any other time in history. For many of us new media and digital technologies are now part of the same palette as oil paint and willow charcoal sticks.

When it comes to embracing technology, there are three approaches that can be taken by artists: Firstly, there are artists not interested in new technologies at all. These artists enjoy traditional means of art making and don't see what new media or recent technologies can offer their practice. Secondly, there are artists working primarily in traditional media but who incorporate new technologies, such as the computer, as a resource to extend their practice. The third group consists of artists that have rejected traditional modes of practice to embrace a totally encoded digital environment.

Of course there are overlaps between these groupings, and movements between these groupings.

Me? Well, I fall into the second group - I really like to combine old and new technologies. My computer is my friend and collaborator! In the morning when I open up the studio, I feed Pinky my cat, and then turn on my iMac to read my emails and generally prepare for the day ahead.

Electronic media technologies have changed the world enormously. Australians have been very active in taking up new technologies. We can now can watch or record digital television to DVD, we can play video games in real time on the internet, send and receive digital pictures and movies on our mobile phones, read the news on the internet, check out breaking news on blogs, download our favourite Pod-casts, and upload our recent thoughts to our new art-diary blog sites.

Working as an artist has meant that entering into this new world of communications and digital media has created more professional opportunities. We now send and receive emails encompassing all aspects of our art practice. We receive electronic newsletters from organisations, notifications of exhibitions and events, business correspondence and cheery and cheeky hellos from friends and family in near and faraway places.

We use the Internet to check out interstate galleries, research materials and media, download grant applications, and investigate all manner of tangible and intangible searches that relate to our art practice.

Artists are creating CD-ROMs to showcase their work to galleries and museums, printing high quality artist portfolios from relatively cheap inkjet printers, and making websites that extend their profile onto the World Wide Web. Some artists also use desktop publishing software to design and layout catalogues or promotional booklets, or to produce magazines, zines and e-zines. Artists use PowerPoint presentations when they give conference papers and lectures, and in some cases to present Public Art proposals.

Many artists also use the computer as a resource tool when they are making artwork. And this happens in many different ways. Painters like Annette Bezor and Deidre But-Husaim use computer software Adobe Photoshop to manipulate images before projecting them onto canvas and painting with brushes and oil paints. A watercolourist friend in Japan, Brian Williams, uses the computer monitor to work from and not photographs because the luminosity of the screen helps him retain the luminosity in his watercolours as he is paints Japanese landscapes.

Sculptors doing large-scale works can now take maquettes to engineering firms who use vector software to lasercut metals and fabricate structures. Some Public Artworks include sophisticated interactive sound installations. Jewellers use computer engraving for surface decoration of a range of metals, and commercial digital etching processes.

Many photo-media artists combine old and new technologies – they use digital files to make film to print cyanotypes, combine Epson digital prints with platinum printing, and there are now artists making daguerreotypes from digital negatives. And digital photographs can be printed using large format inkjet printers onto archival papers, and the Pegasus or large-scale Lambda photographic printing process.

Printmakers also utilise Adobe Photoshop to layer and collage images. The digital file can be printed to film, which is then used to create a plate matrix that is then printed like a traditional plate onto beautiful papers through an etching press.

There are so many ways in which artists incorporate digital technologies into their traditional art practice. Other artists though, work collaboratively with specialist technicians to produce their work.

Patricia Piccinini's new media installations are made collaboratively with a support team of specialists. Some new-media artists like Troy Innocent produce work that exists only in the digital domain, and he writes the code for his experimental computer games. Innocent creates artworks with code just as other artists create with paintbrushes.

Digital artists are specialists in very diverse areas; including computer animation, film and video, interactive performances, and new media installations. The Australian Network for Art and Technology, a national organisation based in Adelaide, has worked very hard to initiate and develop professional opportunities for Australian new-media artists.

There are many ways that artists can get training to utilise digital technologies or to work as new-media artists. Most art schools now have digital labs where students can learn a range of software applications. Many students will use the digital facilities to underpin their work in painting, sculpture, or print media areas. Some students though, will take a specialist pathway through different technologies; learning software programs like other students learn more traditional technologies.
For those artists who left art school before digital courses were part of their curriculum, there are organisations in Adelaide which run short courses in a range of computer programs.

Technology School of the Future runs short courses in Photoshop, DreamWeaver, Flash, iMovie and Internet Publishing. The Media Resource Centre and Adelaide Centre for the Arts have courses in digital film production. You can also teach yourself with software training manuals, and many applications have excellent Internet sites for backup help and troubleshooting.

Artists have successfully engaged with new technologies throughout the ages, so it is no surprise that as new technologies become available many artists are eager to explore the creative intersection between their art practice and electronic systems. High school students now learn to use iMovie, and in some cases Final Cut Pro, to make digital videos as part of their school projects. SALA's Moving Image Festival will feature artists embracing new technologies at venues in and around Adelaide.

SALA Festival has made good use of new technologies with its website which has become a fabulous resource complimenting the printed program. I found accessing information about SALA easier using

the Website than reading the printed program. The already extensive SALA Website is going to be developed further in coming months to showcase the work of individual South Australian artists. In this way, SALA Festival will be actively promoting the work of living South Australian artists throughout the year.

SALA Festival has grown so much since its inception in 1998 and is now an integral part of the cultural calendar of South Australia. Artists participating in this year's SALA Festival cover a wide range of art practices, be they traditional media, hybrid media, or specialist new media artists.

There is room for all.

New technologies will become even more significant in the future for artists wishing to expand the possibilities of their art practices. But technology itself is nothing without the creative person using it.

And it is creative people, South Australian creative people, that we are celebrating during SALA Festival.

Enjoy SALA Festival 2005.

Thank you.

Dianne Longley