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Introduction: the Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader

Stella Brennan

Su Ballard
University of Wollongong, sballard@uow.edu.au

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A sampler containing many voices and visions—histories, critiques and calls to arms—this book has developed out of a particular networked community. A network both evokes and elides. For as Danny Butt asks in his contribution to this book, “How do we think what is not connected?” Or, for that matter, how can we know what (or who) we do not know? Do we as editors have a responsibility to make definitions, despite our awareness that any definition is provisional? Have we not already done so? Can we describe what is digital, what it means to make art on, influenced by, or manipulated through the computer, and do this without falling into the trap of valourising some things and rejecting others in order to construct a plausible progression? Despite Vasari’s sixteenth century attempt to codify a linear method for art history, history has never been progressive. Nor has digital art. What you will find here are a wide range of accounts and artworks, some analytical, some personal, many offering provisional glimpses or definitions of digital art, and often in disagreement. This is the very foundation of ADA.

Aotearoa Digital Arts is New Zealand’s only digital artists’ network, a gathering point for artists in or from Aotearoa working with digital media and technologies. ADA grew out of an email list launched in 2003 by Stella Brennan and Sean Cubitt during Brennan’s time as the inaugural Digital Artist in Residence at Waikato University. ADA was born of the observation that although new media artists were often highly networked in terms of both their own practice and their professional relationships, there was no national organisation drawing together those with a common interest in digital art. This recognition suggested the inextricable importance of place against the frictionless communication enabled, in theory, by network technologies. A sense of place is important to this community, ranging from the nostalgia of the expatriate to the new eyes of the immigrant, from the concern of the environmentalist to the indigenous notion of the whenua forming the ground for belonging and experience.

Key to this book are discussions of the relationship of digital and analogue, of presence and distance, of technology, discipline and media. Here definitions begin to form. Technology too, like the art with which it is entwined, has never offered a clear trajectory, and our history must reflect a formation through rupture, through the losses and possibilities of colonisation, of industrialisation, of computerisation.

Part apologist for, part conscience of technology, where does digital art come from? There are many starting points. Some can be drawn from the steam-powered crash and muscle of the machines of the Industrial Revolution, some from the cybernetic experiments spurred by war-time code-breaking, and some by way of the ordinary magic of everyday appliances, by computers that have become as much shackle as prop and tool. Here, Melanie Swalwell’s investigations of home coders in the 1980s describes a playful curiosity driving an exploration of personal computers whose true usefulness had yet to be defined. Morgan Oliver continues this legacy of homemade interventions,
towards a very real sense of a digital media community in New Zealand. A collection that began in a series of symposia and networked discussions, the Reader reflects ADA’s scope, our gradual, self-generated growth and our focus on the broad sweep of digital media practice—its origination, production, distribution and critique. Formed from a particular community and moment, this compendium maintains a degree of uncertainty; a number of the concerns captured in these pages will be rendered redundant and today’s marginalia may become the key issues of the next decade. It is our hope that, rather than offer any kind of final word, this book begins a conversation that will continue as digital art in Aotearoa evolves.

2. Eco, The Open Work, 99.

In The Open Work Umberto Eco writes: “If I draw a square around a crack in a wall with a piece of chalk, I automatically imply that I have chosen that crack over others and now propose it as a particularly suggestive form.” To label an artwork digital is to enact a similar delineation, turning the artwork into an artifact now somehow meant to contribute something to our understanding of the essence of digital art. In this collection we have attempted to both draw a square and maintain the indeterminacy of its edges. We do not offer a conclusive definition of digital art but steer the reader toward a “particular field of possibilities.”

In their variety, the contents of this volume demonstrate the vitality of digital art in Aotearoa. ADA has enabled the sharing of practices and contributed