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Introduction: the Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader

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Since it was launched five years ago, the Aotearoa Digital Arts network has built up a dedicated community across and beyond New Zealand, characterised by a sharing of resources and practices, and a congenial sparring of ideas. Critical cultural and intellectual mass is today increasingly equated with social networks rather than with immediate physical communities, and these networks are increasingly widely spread over the face of the planet. This raises the question of how to reconcile the fiercely idiosyncratic experiences and creative energies used to snag the emotions of others with the formal rhetoric required to shape communicable, shareable aesthetics. An age-old question for sure, but made more acute when audiences conceivably or even primarily live far from home. As unsettled settlers of a restless tectonic landscape, where the long white cloud fleeces jittery signals buzzing with past and future, New Zealand's artists hold their ground whilst looking to sea and sky to fire their navigational yearnings.

Introduction

Stella Brennan and Su Ballard

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 partisan? 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 valorising 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 ineradicable 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,

hacking his way into game space. Meanwhile Julian Oliver is taken for a spy as he remaps the spaces of data transmission into virtual gardens. Oliver records the anxieties embedded in our relationships with technologies whose inner workings we often don't fully understand.

ADA is born from the Internet and critically reflects a social and cultural engagement with it. The projects Window and The Big Idea both manifest the ability of net spaces to connect and critique. Caroline McCaw evokes the multiplicities of location and connection that new technologies allow, while Vicky Smith and Adam Hyde discuss the possibilities and pitfalls of using communication technologies to link communities of interest, be they artists or school students. Bringing these discussions back to earth, Julian Priest asks us to pause to consider the intricate material networks these communications thread through; his is a realpolitik that examines the environmental impact of plugging in our laptop.

In making this book we solidify things that may have existed as electrical impulses, or film grains in emulsion, or jotted notes, or discontinuous fragments of Internet discussion. Nevertheless, like the radio waves captured and mapped in Zita Joyce's discussion, this paper-bound state is a temporary moment of being. This reader documents a desire to create a lineage for practices and methods that often seem obsessive about their own futures, yet willfully amnesiac, heedless of their own impending obsolescence. As Lissa Mitchell's account of digital archiving prompts us to ask, what broader assumptions about permanence does the evanescence of much digital work force us to reconsider? Douglas Bagnall's fundamentalist analysis of digitality describes the temporal and cultural pervasiveness of the digital as idea and method. With a sense of historical depth shared by Janine Randerson and Eu Jin Chua, Bagnall questions the 'newness' of new media.

A locus for our ancestral yearnings, we count Len Lye as a key influence, invoking his curiosity, his innovative thinking and his respect for indigenous art. We share this ancestry with the post-object art practices of the 70s that opened up galleries to intrusions of sound, movement, and performativity. Andrew Clifford traces this history, sensing a shift towards a total artwork, and ambitions enlivened by collective, interdisciplinary practices. The breakdown of the notion of artworks based on the specificity of media is a thread running through the book. These cross-disciplinary preoccupations manifest in many forms: from Karl Willis's interactive screens to Kurt Adams' gritty 3D drawings and Avatar Body *Collision's* remote acts of cyberformance.

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."¹ 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."²

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

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.

1. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 99.
2. Eco, *The Open Work*, 99.