



DIGITAL ARTS > selling the craft of online art

THE DIGITAL ERA HAS SEEN NOT JUST A GREATER APPRECIATION OF CREATIVE SKILLS BUT ALSO A WELCOME INCREASE IN COMMERCIAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR 'ONLINE ARTISTS'. THIS HAS PRESENTED THEM WITH A DILEMMA, HOWEVER, AS THEY STRUGGLE TO BALANCE COMMERCIAL CHALLENGES AND ARTISTIC PRACTICE. HERE **HELEN VARLEY JAMIESON** EXAMINES WAYS TO SUPPORT THE NEEDS OF BOTH ARTIST AND BUSINESS.

Many people will readily admit to not really knowing what 'online art' is. Also known as net.art or Web-based art, it takes many forms, with the common feature being that the artwork is exhibited on the Internet – and designed to exist in that context.

And we're not talking here about using the Internet for simple broadcast and dissemination, but as a creative medium in itself: hypertexts, email art, chat-room performances, animations, websites, and so on. As a result, much of it is experiential and doesn't necessarily exist in a tangible or continuing form.

What is for real is that New Zealand artists are creating a wide range of online works.

Audio alchemists Radioqualia (www.radioqualia.net) bring remote collaborators together for live performances; Douglas Bagnall is the programming wizard behind UpStage (www.upstage.org.nz), 12,800,000 Views of Taranaki (www.halo.gen.nz) and online robot musicians; and there are quirky projects like the love letters of Nicola Farquhar (<http://www.stella.co.nz/sweetheart>) – to name just a few.

Most visible are the individuals and groups using websites to market and sell offline work, from The Big Idea (www.tbi.co.nz) – promoting New Zealand arts of all disciplines – to Julianne Pearce (www.urgentartwork.co.nz), who takes donations via PayPal for her free-to-download fonts. In some instances, Web marketing has inspired creative endeavours online. Virtual TART (www.tart.co.nz) has facilitated international exchanges, exhibitions and collaborations and has been so successful that director Dale Copeland opened a physical gallery, Real TART, as well, and is able to live off her art.

A handful of online artists manage to go from grant to residency to grant to commission. Others juggle their skills, building websites and other related work. Some have teaching positions where they can

find ways to build in some of their art practice.

Sadly, I have yet to meet a New Zealand artist who can make a living solely in online art for any significant length of time, especially without going overseas. Like most artists, we work for the love of it not the money.

Window (window.auckland.ac.nz) was established by graduates of the Elam School of Art in 2002 with a physical location at the University of Auckland as well as a website, exhibiting both on and offline work by New Zealand and international artists. Few New Zealand galleries are exhibiting online art via their websites – perhaps because it's difficult to 'sell' a work of art that only exists on the Internet. Overseas, the Whitney Museum's Artport (artport.whitney.org) and Gallery 9 at the Walker Art Center (gallery9.walkerart.org) are among a growing number of galleries commissioning artists to create online work.

Looking overseas for models that successfully combine online arts with commercial enterprise, it's interesting to discover where New Zealand artists have found homes. Futurefarmers (www.futurefarmers.com) and Select Parks (www.selectparks.net) are the online workplaces of ex-pat Kiwi artists Josh On and Julian Oliver, respectively. In both companies, a commercial operation actively supports artistic experimentation, promoting artworks alongside commercial portfolios. Many online artists, me included, spend significant periods out of the country in order to sustain our artistic practice. In saying that, however, recent initiatives such as the Smash Palace Fund, University of Waikato's Digital Artist in Residence and the inaugural Vodafone Digital Art Awards signal a growing recognition of digital artists in this country, which is appreciated. More awards, residencies, commissions and events will help to support online artists who want to keep their base in New Zealand.

Do online artists suffer as much for their art as more traditional peers? You bet. In some ways, they have it better because they tend to have other saleable skills, such as IT and computing. But the online artist is also at a disadvantage as work is not yet widely known, understood or valued outside a comparatively small circle; the art is not easily marketed or sold as there's no tangible product to take away; and while the Internet is a great creative medium, it's also a huge playground for 'every man and his blog', so there's a danger of drowning without ever being noticed.

Through it all, online artists have a significant part to play in the development of digital content.

The existence of companies like Futurefarmers – a software interface design business with clients including Adobe and Hewlett Packard – and Select Parks demonstrate that unfettered artistic exploration can co-exist with and enrich commercially-oriented projects. In return for providing a foundation from which the artists can develop their practice, these companies benefit enormously from continuity and the artists' maturing skills.

Online artists are pioneering specialised methods and techniques in remote collaboration, technology, data management, and lateral thinking that will eventually be adopted by business in the global market as well as by educationalists and the wider public.

Valuing and nurturing free artistic experimentation can help to facilitate fruitful relationships between businesses and these artists who are already using tomorrow's tools today.

[HELEN VARLEY JAMIESON IS A FREELANCE WRITER AND ONLINE ARTIST IN WELLINGTON] SOME OF HER WORK CAN BE VIEWED AT: WWW.CREATIVE-CATALYST.COM WWW.AVATARBODYCOLLISION.ORG WWW.UPSTAGE.ORG