

AUSTRALIAN VISUAL ARTS: LIBRARIES AND THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES

By John Thomson and Joye Volker*

Abstract: Initiatives underway in Australia are providing opportunities for innovative solutions to the application of new visual resources technology in teaching and research. A series of projects have been set up using World Wide Web technology in academic institutions. The Web offers opportunities for sharing materials transparently around the world and promises to be especially valuable in the visual arts generally because it can deal with images just as easily as text. Institutions are also embracing CDROM technology and many products have already been developed. This paper will describe the strategies, the development of projects and the products available and will also discuss the impact of integration of these new technologies on visual arts libraries in Australia.

Introduction

Australia is a big country - the sixth largest in the world. With an area of 7,682 square kilometres it is not much smaller than the United States of America, or indeed all of Europe. The distance from Sydney on the east coast to Perth on the west coast is 4160 km which is almost the same as the distance from Istanbul to Seville. Our nearest neighbours are New Zealand (Sydney to Auckland is the same distance as Istanbul to Warsaw) and Indonesia (Darwin to Jakarta is the same distance as Istanbul to Monaco).

Distance and isolation both within the country and from the rest of the world, have always been problems for Australians. Governments have recognised that Australians have the right of equal access to the nation's resources, regardless of where they live. Increased access to the collections of public institutions such as museums and libraries has been a key feature of government policy for some years.

The World Wide Web

In Australia, perhaps because of the tyranny of distance, there is great interest in

* Paper delivered at the workshop of the IFLA Art Libraries Section in Istanbul 1995.

the development of AARNet (the Australian Academic Research Network - Australia's version of the Internet) and the provision of information over electronic networks. In March this year the Australian Library and Information Association launched ALIANet - a World Wide Web site. It is believed that it is the first national association to offer electronic mail services and access to on-line information via AARNet to its members.

The last few years have transformed forever the way we will communicate in the visual arts. This has been achieved through the development of the World Wide Web for multimedia access to images via the Internet and an increasing sophistication and availability of CD-ROM technology. The Internet and particularly the World Wide Web software offers opportunities for sharing materials transparently around the world. It promises to be especially valuable in art history and the visual arts generally, because it can deal easily with images and diagrams as well as text. Whether the promise is fulfilled depends not merely on co-operation between interested parties (and this must be international, given the nature of the Web), but also on the resolution of the many problems related to Copyright of both objects and intellectual property.

The Web allows us to electronically publish text and visual information which has generated electronic exhibition catalogues, publications on the visual arts and interactive collaboration in art practice on a global scale. It also allows us to optimise resource sharing with other visual arts institutions within Australia.

In Australia there are three Web servers which have a visual arts focus: ArtServe at the Australian National University's Department of Art History; DIVA at Monash University and AusArts at the Australian National University Institute of the Arts Library. The latter two have been implemented by Librarians.

ArtServe is the largest image bank in the world and currently gets over 1,000 enquires per day from all over the world. Materials included are 2,800 images of "Print & Print History" which includes a database-query interface; 2,600 images of „Architecture of the Mediterranean Basin“ and a 120,000 word book "The Greek and Roman Cities of Western Turkey".

DIVA (Digital Images, Visual Arts) has a focus on Australian arts, particularly art produced in Melbourne. It contains images of architecture, performance art, painting and sculpture.

AusArts, was developed over the last four months of 1994. The initial objective was to setup a virtual library for the visual arts and music. It was to be an electronic 'start here' for students and staff, providing an introduction to the extraordinary amount of information in cyberspace. It has now moved towards

providing online exhibitions with a focus on contemporary Australian art and to publishing information about the Institute of the Arts and promoting its courses and facilities.

Government Policy

At national government level there is recognition of the potential of new technologies. In October 1994 Australia's Prime Minister launched a major new Government cultural policy titled "Creative Nation". It attempted to define and re-assess Australian culture and aimed to encourage innovation, self-expression and creativity. In one of the key policy areas the government recognised that "interactive multi-media has the potential to become a new force in education, art, culture and service and the biggest information business in the world."¹ The government it would spend Australian \$84 million over four years on five specific measures. These included "the commissioning of CD-ROMs involving material from our major cultural institutions for Australian schools under the "Australia on CD program"². Another measure was the establishment of a government owned company, Australian Multimedia Enterprise, to encourage private sector support in project development and to assess and oversee projects from the concept stage through to commercialisation and distribution.

Resources for Australian Art Research

For many years at the annual conferences of the Arts Library Society / Australia and New Zealand (ARLIS/ANZ), arts librarians had been debating the paucity of resources for Australian art research and teaching. The arts, unlike the sciences and the humanities, were poorly served by existing sources. Few Australian newspapers or art journals were indexed. Biographical information, especially for nineteenth century or new and emerging artists, was almost impossible to find. Details for exhibitions, except for major ones, were difficult to trace. Librarians had to rely on a combination of memory, detective skills, intuition and resourcefulness.

There had been a couple of attempts to fill these gaps using electronic technology. In the early 1980's, the Australian National Gallery Library in Canberra began an on-line data base „Australian art index“ (AARTI). Ambitiously it attempted to provide details of all Australian exhibitions, journal articles, new monographs and biographies of artists. Due to dwindling staff resources in the Gallery Library, the

¹ Creative nation: Commonwealth cultural policy. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1994. ISBN 0 642 22126X, p. 55

² Creative Australia. op. cit. p. 57.

project ceased in 1985. Two microfiche sets were produced covering the years 1982-85. In September 1983 the Australia Council (the Federal government's arts policy and funding body) began an on-line index of their file or press clippings on arts activities in Australia (ARTSDOC). There were 21,000 clippings indexed when the project ceased in 1988. It was proposed that the clippings themselves would be published on microfiche, but due to copyright problems this was never achieved.

In the last few years there has been some improvement in indexing Australian art journals. Ironically the best access is through two foreign indexing services. "Art Index" and "Design and Applied Arts Index" both of which index Australian titles.

The field of Craft is well documented in Australia with "Craftline", an nation-wide database which includes 7000 biographies. Three volumes of „Index to craft journals“ (1979-1990) covers not only Australian but also European and North American craft journals. The continuation of the Index is not assured as it relies on the successful application for project funding.

CD-ROMS

In the last few years, there has been an unprecedented expansion of CD-ROM technology. Some believe that it is only an interim technology, others that it is the medium for the new millennium. It is estimated that there are 9,500 CD-ROMs currently available world wide with an annual growth rate of 50%³. Whatever its long term future, CD-ROM technology, with its storage capacity for both text and image, its ability to make connections and pathways that are not possible with existing systems and its low reproduction cost, is ideal for art related products.

It is a very long and costly exercise to produce CD-ROMS and with the small Australian market (total population is 18 million), a reasonable return on investment is risky. Despite the problems and risks, major Australian arts institutions and organisations, recognising the advantages of the technology, are producing CD-ROMs. Some of these are discussed below.

Discovery Media

One of the most exciting development has been the emergence of Discovery Media, a small electronic publishing house in Sydney. The two young owners

³ Figures quoted from "CD-ROM industry to boom: facts and figures". Online currents Vol 10, no. 1 January/February 1995. p. 23.

have a background in art history and editing and some computing knowledge. As students both has been frustrated at the difficulties in finding information in a wide variety of different places and recognised the potential for electronic publishing in making resources on cultural life easily available.

Australian Visual Arts Database

Discovery Media's first title was „Australian Visual Arts Database“ (AVAD). It was published in early 1992 with 15 databases. This CD-ROM has revolutionised art research. It has not only provided easy and instant access to information from a range of published sources, but also has made available much previously unpublished material. The third edition of AVAD was released in February 1995. There are 19 individual databases containing biographical information, details of exhibition catalogues 1990-93, historical exhibitions, auction records 1984-1993 and periodical indexes.

A notable new data base on the third edition of AVAD is the Index to the Illustrations in „Art In Australia“. „Art and Australia“ was published from 1916 to 1942 and contained some of the most important writings and developments during this period of Australian art. The lack of an index has always been a major impediment to research. An index had been compiled on cards, but was not available publicly. ARLIS/ANZ has struggled for many years to find funds and a methods whereby the index could be published. With the appearance of CD-ROM technology and the enthusiasm of Discovery Media, the first part on the index has at last been published relatively cheaply and with little effort. It is hoped that further sections of the index can also be published in this form.

Art Right Now

"Art Right Now", also published by Discovery Media is the first Australian CD-ROM to cover contemporary Australian art. It features art and commentary by and about 45 contemporary artists. It includes more than 400 images of paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, 3-D forms and installations.

Future CD-ROM projects in preparation by Discovery Media are the papers of Sir Joseph Banks (an 18th century botanist and explorer who first recorded much of Australia's flora and fauna) and a design and technology CD-ROM aimed at school students.

Poster Art 1914-1920

The first major public institution in Australia to publish an exhibition catalogue on CD-ROM was the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. This was based on

the exhibition „Poster Art 1914-1920“ held in 1992-93. It contains 92 British, German, French and Australian war posters of the period. A description of each poster is spoken in English, German, French and Japanese. It also contains information about the artists, typographical style, use of national images and other themes such as wartime propaganda, coping with shortages and funding the war.

Patterns of power: Aboriginal art from Arnhem Land

In June 1995, the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra is to release its first CD-ROM: "Patterns of power: Aboriginal art from Arnhem Land." (Arnhem Land is an area of 72,000 square kilometres in the north of Australia). The disk will contain 180 artworks carefully selected to show the extent of the work produced by the indigenous people of Arnhem Land. Unlike CD-ROMs from other art museums, this disc does not attempt to contain all the works from the Gallery's collection. Instead the full potential of CD-ROM technology is being exploited to include a wide variety of resource material. There will be photographs and moving images of ceremonies and of the environment in which the artist lives, as well as interviews with artists, traditional music and other culturally important material that helps in the understanding of the art. There will also be maps and animated diagrams to explain geography and important signs and symbols in the work. Other background information such as photographs, film and diagrams will explain methods and techniques. Information on the disc is seen, heard and explored in a non-linear minimally verbal way. This can be more accessible to some people.

Great care has gone into the design and creation of this disc. The designers have always been aware that hi-tech can overshadow the context in which the art was produced. The quality of the image has been a major priority. For example it will be possible to rid the screen of all the surrounding borders and icons leaving just the artwork to occupy the viewer's attention. For three dimensional objects, video film has been rejected because of its poor resolution. Instead there will be four photographs taken from the front, back and each side of the object. This will enable a partial „walk around“ the object, while still ensuring the same high quality resolution of other works.

Conrad Martens: Life & Art

In May 1995 the State Library of New South Wales will release a CD-ROM on Conrad Martens (a British born artist who arrived in Australia in 1835 and provided a unique record of the formative part of Australia's history). The CD-ROM will draw on 2000 items including watercolours, oil paintings, drawings,

sketch books and notebooks, as well as specially written text and spoken extracts from Martens' lectures and diaries, much of which has never been publicly available.

National Film and Sound Archive

Another national institution, The National Film and Sound Archive has announced the release in May 1995 of a CD-ROM containing catalogue listings of 250,000 items from the Archives's collection. These cover feature films, newsreels and documentaries, radio serials and advertisements and sound recordings. The first edition of the CD-ROM will contain text only. It will be updated annually and in future will include increasing proportions of associated sounds, stills and moving images.

Artistic and CD-ROM

A new generation of artists are taking CD-ROM technology in a new direction. At Perspecta '95, a biennial review of modern art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, several artists have worked with computers to produce CD-ROMs which use images, sound and text. In June 1995, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Australia's newest contemporary art museum, will open an exhibition, "Burning the Interface: Artists' CD-ROM". It explores new interfaces and interactive audiovisual potentials and is believed to be the first major exhibition of its kind in the world. An international call for proposals yielded 135 replies - far greater than was expected. In Melbourne a new digital art gallery, Drive - Art of the New Media, exhibits a range of work including interactive multimedia installations, animation and static digital art.

Impact of new technology on visual arts libraries

The impact of integrating these new technologies into visual arts libraries in Australia requires librarians to have new skills. Librarians must deal with very complex issues in the management of new technology. Some skills include organising information in digital formats, retrieving this information, designing human-computer interfaces, identifying learning systems, promoting information literacy including teaching others how to access and use electronic information, publishing in digital formats and assisting others in digital publishing and designing, developing and creating information products. It is important to take advantage of opportunities to share ideas that work, and to learn from each other's experience. This Conference has a significant role to play in helping visual arts libraries transform themselves as a result of new information technology. The key

to transformation lies in weaving technology into the very fabric of the Library so that it is automatically considered as one of the tools available to meet the challenges, solve the problems and accomplish the goals of the art library and its institution.

The new visual arts library must be a multimedia resource centre, capable of providing intellectual access to information embracing visual, audio, print and electronic media in the visual arts. In doing so it will have broken some barriers in the complex web of the provision of visual resources.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of the following people in the preparation of this paper:

Helen Bongiorno and Martin Shub, Discovery Media; Professor Michael Greenhalgh, Australian National University; Judith Kelly, State Library of New South Wales; Frances Love former Manager, Information Centre; Australia Council; Jean McAuslan, Australian War Memorial; Peter Naumann, National Gallery of Australia; Richard Stone; David Watson, Museum of Contemporary Arts, Sydney.

John Thomson
Library
National Gallery of Australia
GPO Box 1150
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia