

Interview with Kate Roberts, Manager/Curator Art Development

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

Q: There have been a number of Asian-themed art exhibitions in NZ (currently an Indonesian exhibition, the recent exhibition at the Adam Art Gallery, Concrete Horizons a survey show of Chinese Art etc). Is this a recent phenomenon? What is driving it? What is the public response? And what do local artists make of/how do they respond to these exhibitions?

A: The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery has been charged since the 1960s with showing the art of the Pacific Rim; identifying New Zealand with Asia and the Pacific. Having said that, organising exhibitions of contemporary art from countries in Asia is not a simple affair – it means liaison with curators in those regions, dealing with language barriers, visiting the area to see work, often seeking out artists who have a reputation from international biennials or art fairs, but have never dealt with New Zealand galleries before. In the case of both Mediarena and Transindonesia Greg Burke, the Director of the Gallery visited both countries to see work (in the case of Japan for Mediarena a number of times) and established relationships with curators to make the exhibitions possible. Sophie McIntyre, Director of the Adam Art Gallery had personal connections with China and combined her own curatorial practice and her knowledge of China to develop Concrete Horizons. The timing of the exhibitions at the Adam and at the Govett-Brewster was actually totally coincidental but the exhibitions do reflect the catching up to be done in our understanding of our own region. We have been aware of contemporary art in Europe and the US for decades - why don't we know the art of our closest neighbours? The response to Mediarena was huge.

Audiences responded very well to the single country theme and the work itself which they found surprisingly fun and accessible. I'm sure local artists welcome the rare opportunity to see a wide selection of contemporary art from Japan as well.

Q: Mediarena included a range of works using new media, including video and sound projection and digital animation -did this pose technical challenges to the Gallery?

A: Yes Mediarena was a stretch for us technologically – we needed to install live web links and use bigger and more complex computer set ups than ever before. But , being a contemporary art gallery we have had to make a point of meeting technical challenges to show digital media in the past – in exhibitions like *Extended Play*, which involved a number of video and sound based works, and *Bloom* which included a number of digitally created works , *Arcadia* where we had a big computer gaming room linked to the web. We have developed techniques for wall and screen projection to get high quality installations – it has become one of our specialties.

Q: Approximately when did the Gallery begin showing video work by artists and what was the early video work like?

A: The gallery has been showing video work since the early 1980s. The technology in the mid eighties was very limited - projector meant slide projector, video meant a video cassette player connected to a TV and only a handful of people, probably mostly IBM employees, had computers at home. Video was often incorporated into sculptural installations, rather than standing on its own because the technology didn't exist to present it in an attractive way. I think many young artists took to creating video footage with great verve, but displaying it was another story. There are costs involved and it takes good problem solving and engineering skills to do it well.

Q: Are art galleries the best place for presenting new media works? What would be the ideal space for presenting new media?

A: New media art challenges all of the conventions of the gallery space as developed for modern art - the white cube with the pale wooden floor. To show video art you need dark spaces and flexible modular wall systems. There is so much computer art now the question has almost become what would a permanent facility for displaying computer generated art look like - probably more like a warehouse with lots of data cabling and black cubes within the structure - the white cube will never be the answer for this type of art work.

Q: Looking back at the Gallery's exhibition programme, can you see a pattern of development in art in video and audio formats?

A: The pattern that emerges in relation to the types of media used follows the development of the market for technology in the home and to some extent business. As the availability and complexity of computer software has developed more artists have begun working with the technology. There are artistic responses to animation technology, to the Internet, to electronic sound and to digital camera and digital video camera capability. For some time we have been running video programmes as separate exhibitions in our theatre - showing the depth of work available all in the one medium - you can develop exhibitions with a wide range of themes selecting internationally without any difficulty. Obviously works are often responses to the media themselves - a lot of work is made as a comment on the social phenomena of mass media, advertising, television and cinema.

Q: How has the Gallery responded to the demands of the presenting new media?

A: The Gallery has been forced to be innovative in this area, by dint of being a gallery of contemporary art. It is a big step now for galleries to commit to taking on new video work. Technically new media art requires a gallery to keep up with technology - acquiring new display equipment as it becomes affordable - flat screen TVs, better and better projectors, a lot of computing power. To do that on a publicly funded budget has taken a lot of ingenuity in many areas from funding raising through to the technical areas.

Q: What do you see as the future of new media art? Where is it headed?

A: I see more of the same - all of the new technology you see around you will be adopted by artists. Animation will get more lifelike, virtual reality will happen. As photographic technology develops so will art photography - the recent trend has been to bigger and bigger prints on synthetic paper for instance, because the technology has become available probably for advertising demand. Printing on new materials will make new effects possible - 3D and animation effects. There may be new opportunities for overlap of media that have been traditionally separate - ways to combine painting and sculpture with technology. From our perspective it would now seem weird to have a gallery programme composed of painting, drawing photography and sculpture.



**Shot 3: Exonemo video still Fragmental Storm 2002 reprinted from
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