



Groundswell

REGIONAL ARTS SURGING FORWARD
REGIONAL ARTS AUSTRALIA NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2002

Tributary 1.9 Art + New Technologies in Regional Regeneration

Digital Storytelling

by MALCOLM MCKINNON

I'm an artist who spends a lot of time attempting to demonstrate a useful role for artists within fields of endeavour where art is not a self-evident virtue. In a practical sense, this often seems to involve debunking the myth of artist-as-useless-wanker – of defining a practical application for skills often dismissed as esoteric.

I think that the same need to demonstrate useful roles and contexts also applies to the field of digital media (sometimes referred to as “new media”). As with any tool, there's a need to define applications that demonstrate real benefits, both immediate and potential. As an artist primarily interested in the collecting and representation of stories, what this means for me is that the medium must always serve the message (not vice-versa), and that the most important or vital thing is always good content and a strong idea.

I've been working over the past few years on a range of digital video projects with various rural communities. Outcomes from these projects have included two series of short documentary segments made for broadcast on regional commercial television, and a number of short documentary film projects with communities in different parts of the country.

Currently, I'm undertaking a two-year project (supported primarily by an Australia Council Fellowship) with several community-run museums in country South Australia and Victoria and with the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne to develop and present stories that enliven various aspects of local histories. In this work, I'm keen to explore methods of presentation that can shift the audience dynamic beyond that generally created through small museum displays. I'm also wanting to construct narratives that are less didactic and less predictable than those normally presented through local museums, encouraging viewers to work a little harder in assimilating and responding to the various stories that make up a particular history (and to consider the contemporary resonance of that history).

In a physical sense, I'm working with the various museums to develop stimulating installations that combine screen based material with physical artefacts. (For example, I have a story about disappeared racecourses in north-west Victoria, told mainly by a bloke who was a star jockey in the 1930's and '40s. In this instance I'm intending that film material might be projected into the inside of a racing trophy, or on to a set of jockey silks as part of a tightly constructed sculptural installation.)

In all of this work, I'm interested in allowing people to tell their own stories, and in presenting those stories through the original voice. I prefer a narrative style that relies heavily on quotation and avoids voice-over commentary. I'm interested not just in what people say but also the way they say it, and the personality they project in doing so.

[CONFERENCE PRESENTATION AT THIS POINT INCLUDED SCREENING OF THREE INDICATIVE SHORT VIDEO WORKS, MADE WITH LOCAL PEOPLE IN VARIOUS SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AND VICTORIA.]

Digital video is an especially effective medium in projects aiming to directly present local voices or local vernacular. The sophisticated capacity of contemporary editing software makes it possible to process and present diverse documentary material in effective and interesting ways. It's relatively easy to combine first hand story telling with a range of illustrative material - to cut and paste and layer together archival film and photographs, depictions of artefacts and landscape, text and diverse audio material. A huge amount of stuff can be concentrated and brought together within a short piece of film, recognising that most of us are highly literate in this medium – we're good at assimilating information through the screen.

Dynamic and interactive presentation formats are currently evolving and becoming easier and cheaper to produce. We're fast moving beyond the era of the TV monitor and the VHS tape deck. Touch-screens offering a menu of stories with multiple narrative pathways, and movement or light triggered projections whereby large scale image and sound can envelope and transform a viewing space are just a couple of the alternative possibilities.



Just a significantly, digital media is inherently adaptable and transposable, lending itself to multi-platform applications and presentations. Work can be accessed in multiple locations in a range of formats and frameworks, both physical and virtual. (In the case of my project with regional museums, this means that work can be simultaneously displayed locally, both at the museums and at other local venues, as well at ACMI in Melbourne.)

In closing I want to underline the point that recent advances in digital audio-visual technology have provided powerful and accessible / affordable tools that can be well applied within the community-based cultural sector. Within this realm there's enormous potential for fruitful collaborative endeavours involving communities, artists and people from other professional disciplines. (Inherent to this collaborative potential is the possibility of interesting cross-sectoral linkages involving agencies with mutual interests spanning disparate agendas.) From my own experience, I know that this potential certainly applies to endeavours focussed around the collecting, making and presentation of good stories. ■

— Malcolm McKinnon