

Internet age demands artists and art lovers think again

TOM UGLOW THE AUSTRALIAN MAY 23, 2015 12:00AM



'The job of the artist is to create work for the world in which we live.' Illustration: Eric Lobbecke Source: TheAustralian

Art reveals to us truths about ourselves; it transforms ideas into reality, even when those ideas are newer than the artwork. A 2000-year-old poem still will move us to tears; a 500-year-old play can make us laugh even though we know all the words and how it ends. A love song still can make our stomach skip 20 years after the honeymoon ended.

But today the arts are ignoring the truth of the digital age. Everywhere we look are film, television and literary plots in which people's mobile phone is forgotten or conveniently breaks or, worse, doesn't seem to exist at all. That's cheating. Phones, tablets, devices exist — we can't go backwards. The job of the artist is to create work for the world in which we live.

The broader contemporary art world, therefore, is facing a conundrum. How do we use the new potential of the digital realm that surrounds us to convey the power of artists, at the peak of their ability, to move us? Because, almost worse than the prospect of a world without art, is a world of stagnating culture; a world that seeks only to preserve and protect the culture of the past and has no space for digital theatre, locative opera or non-linear, hyper-dimensional poetry.

When was the last time culture terrified us or made us want to riot, or ban it, or burn it? Each of these phenomena occurred on multiple occasions during the 20th century and almost always the culture at the centre of the disturbance turned out to be, well, rather good art.

But we are now 20 years into the age of internet, and while we may be terrified by the speed of these sweeping transformations — some may want to riot, ban it, burn it — the cultural world seems reluctant to celebrate new work by the digital avant-garde, or equally to reject it, in any medium. It remains the art in the lobby. Or, quite frequently, it appears with an #occupy tag on social media, as in "We AR at MOMA".

Then there is the example of Belgian group Hack the Art World, which disrupted the Google-produced DevArt exhibit with a "geo-fenced" protest show. What does a protest show look like in the digital art world? It was an alternative online show that could be accessed on a phone only if you were physically standing in the Barbican Centre in London.

As with many aspects of our “scary” new age, there are certain infrastructure issues that are not attuned to the challenges of future culture. We could be building our public spaces to be more digitally versatile, yet the speed of technological change makes it too complex to specify what that may mean in five or 10 years.

And while questions lurk around whether we’re creating the infrastructure future artists may use, today’s artists need to make a living, despite any romantic notions to the contrary. While music and film, in some instances, can be learned and created in the teenage bedroom, other art forms require investment, of time and money, to create. A painter is still only in hock to the material costs of their raw materials. An author may need only a laptop, but that is why the book has largely remained in the same format it has for the past 500 years, despite the internet having the potential to free literature from its bindings into myriad new forms of narrative text.

The digital cultural community is a rich, diverse and flourishing field. Internationally there are big names starting to appear, contemporary artists such as John Gerrard or Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, media artists such as Cory Arcangel or Ryoji Ikeda, Aaron Koblin or Ryan Trecartin. There is a new canon of virtual-reality storytellers led by Chris Milk and Vincent Morisset whose virtual worlds will soon be visiting you on your sofas. There are immersive writers such as Eli Horowitz and choreographers such as Gideon Obarzanek.

Most of these artists have work showing around Australia this year. Or one could visit New York, where galleries such as Lauren Cornell’s New Museum are dedicated solely to emerging forms of contemporary art and culture.

The broader future of the arts, in a contemporary sense, relies on tomorrow’s great artists, writers and composers being given access to the skills required to unlock the possibilities of this new era of culture at an ever younger age, at the classroom level. The onus is on schools, arts organisations and funding bodies to grant that access, lest they be channelled solely into the existing culture: galleries with walls to fill, theatres with seats to fill, publishers with books to sell. There are so many grander possibilities.

The future of digital art should not be reliant on a few accidental coders or on engineers building “art tools”; nor should it be held back by a generation that grew up without YouTube. To create great new art that is imbued with infinite access to information, but still with the physical presence and power to enchant and awe, and to ask questions of its audience, will require more than time: the art we love will need help from those who are looking after it.

We need braver curation from our globally recognised institutions and biennales, and more critical discourse to distinguish what is art from beloved light shows. We need leadership.

There are green shoots. The Australia Council has multiple digital initiatives across all sectors of culture, while in Paris the emerging Le Lab in Google’s Cultural Institute is probing deeper into the space. Le Lab has a dedicated team building technology relevant to the arts industry and hosts resident artists and authors, including young Australian artist Nicholas Maurer. Le Lab will become a place where the worlds of technology and culture meet and collaborate on new innovations in the cultural arena, with seminars and residencies for both communities to share ideas and equipment such as 3-D scanners and gigapixel cameras to enable joint technology initiatives.

The best art, theatre and dance of today, of course, will be seen from the future. The complexities of today’s society will be shown back to ourselves by artists, and it will be multi-linear, time-agnostic, fragmented and discordant. Otherwise it will be a pastiche. Because all art is seen by audiences who are living in the future, not in the past. They will judge it, not us.

Ultimately it is not a matter of what is “better”: paint or pixels, data or Dostoyevsky. It is about finding a way to support and create access to the best new work, however it is made. That means working harder to create digital initiatives and enable artists to create work that look forward into a world we don’t yet understand.

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