Inheriting a Digital Art Archive in Aotearoa

1st Ted Whitaker, 2nd Vicki Smith

Affiliation (s) Aotearoa Digital Arts (ADA) Network
Location, Country Aotearoa / New Zealand
Contact Emails ted@tedwhitaker.co.nz, exitstagewest@gmail.com

Abstract

Inheriting a Digital Art Archive in Aotearoa looks at how the work of understanding, presenting and recording digital arts practice in Aotearoa is understood, cared for and valued by others. It looks at the intergenerational significance of non-profit work by past board members of the Aotearoa Digital Arts Network and how that has translated in the two decades since the Aotearoa Digital Art (ADA) network was established.

Keywords

Aotearoa, Intergenerational, Archiving, Non-profit organisation, Digital Arts Practice, ADA, Weaving, Technological Infrastructures, Place-based Storytelling, Sustainability.
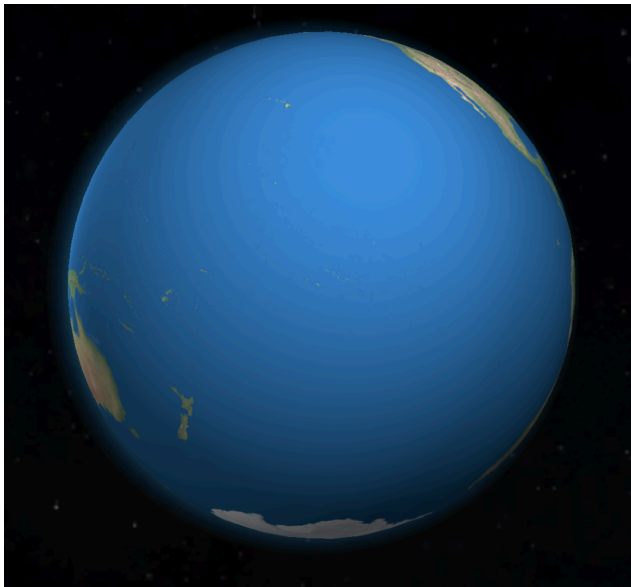
Introduction

Fig 1. Digital render of a Pacific centred globe, 2015. Author: Przemek Pietrak.
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Globe_-_Pacific_Ocean_space_view.png]

Aotearoa New Zealand is an island nation, deep in the South Pacific Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa, considered in cartographic terms to be one of the most isolated parts of the world, yet perhaps in response to this seeming geographic isolation is assertively connected in digital practice and methodology. This paper explores the roots of digital arts in Aotearoa, the work by earlier generations of trustees of the Aotearoa Digital Arts (ADA) Network and how that has informed the work current trustees undertake today.

Operating 100% voluntarily in its governance structure, ADA holds a strong community focus with its founding principles and embedded ideologies. Community building is at the core through its [remaining operational] Mailing List from 2003, sporadic symposia, published articles, workshops, exhibitions and online archive. These community outputs tour throughout Aotearoa in a way to create multiple access points from around the country and to allow wider discussion points for an emerging field.

Fast-forward to 2024, a new generation of artists, writers and curators are looking again to the ADA archive for foundational work, text and events that have shaped our path. What are the current challenges and why is this important for an organisation like ADA to continue this work?

A Mailing List to thread together a Community

Fig 2. A female worker changing jacquard cards in a lace making machine. Lewis, George P. (Photographer), 1918. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Employment_of_Women_in_Britain,_1914-1918_Q28124.jpg]

In 2002 Stella Brennan became the first 'Digital Artist in Resident' at Waikato University. The residency had been set up to intersect with the 'criticism and creativity' framework of their Digital Arts Programme. From the broad remit of the residency came the proposal to host a one day symposium to find the gaps in understanding who were the digital artists, create a framework to define them and shape a manifesto of Digital Arts in Aotearoa.

"New Media in New Zealand" convened by Sean Cubitt and Stella Brennan at Waikato University acknowledging Waikato's roots as the first Internet Gateway in New Zealand (in 1989). The call to attend asked of the participants Who are we? How did we get here? Where are we going? It also extended an invitation to the nascent 'archive of conversations' set up on the Waikato List servers.[1]

The mailing list was initially a combination of the host's address books of contacts, a pre-social media forum

connecting those across Aotearoa and Kiwi (New Zealanders) working internationally. This 'localised' gathering in person and online included artists, researchers and technologists who would go on to form the Aotearoa Digital Arts (ADA) Network.

The Symposium graphic was an image of lace making bobbins, referencing Brennan's work *Tuesday, 3 July 2001, 10:38am (2001 – 2002)*, a Macintosh desktop screen grab with each pixel of the image rendered in embroidery thread. The craft image also conceptually connected interdisciplinary practices and references computer programmer Ada Lovelace's comparison of the punch cards of the Jacquard Loom to her Analytical Engine. The ADA network began interlacing critical investigation and the strands of digital practice to produce a participatory and productive community and is continually adding more threads.[2]

Early activities, digital gatherings and network mapping

In amongst discussions of the who and how of this new media landscape and its formative activities over the next few years a number of events gathered the growing number of self selecting individuals who had joined the ADA list or been to an ADA event and therefore becoming part of the Aotearoa Digital Arts (ADA) network. Toi Aotearoa / Creative New Zealand added a Media Arts Category within its general funding pool.

The next seminal event Re:mote was proposed to the discussion list by convener Adam Hyde (the third Digital Artist in Residence at Waikato). Picking up on the early network building it was framed as a new media festival or one-day Symposium. Re:mote was curated as a zero fees event and sought to avoid the disjuncture of the online experience by pre-recording the presentations and running live discussion with the artists. This allowed for more community and relationship building, introduced ADA to some international artists and launched the local New Media scene to the rest of the internet. Followed shortly after by the first of the more long-form hybrid events ADA was to become known for.

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[1] https://ada.net.nz/about/list/

[2] https://ada.net.nz/events/symposia/the-first-ada-symposium-2003/

ADA_emerge was the combined efforts of Stella Brennan, Su Ballard and Caro McCaw, supported with both institutional and national arts funding, it spanned the academy, art school and formal gallery space and set a number of precedents. It shifted physical focus to the other end of the islands (being hosted in Ōtepoti Dunedin). ADA_emerge focused on the formal presentation of artworks and the articulation of practice, included both through performance and in networked conversation. ADA_merge generated attendee interest and continued to co-construct some of the symposium format through the ADA list.

ADA_emerge was also the site for the arrival of the Analogue Art of the Sandwich (Instruction and Ingredients by Caro McCaw). The importance of gathering in localised and connected communities, sharing of practice, works in progress and critical review alongside the community building function of sharing kai (food) became foundational for future events.
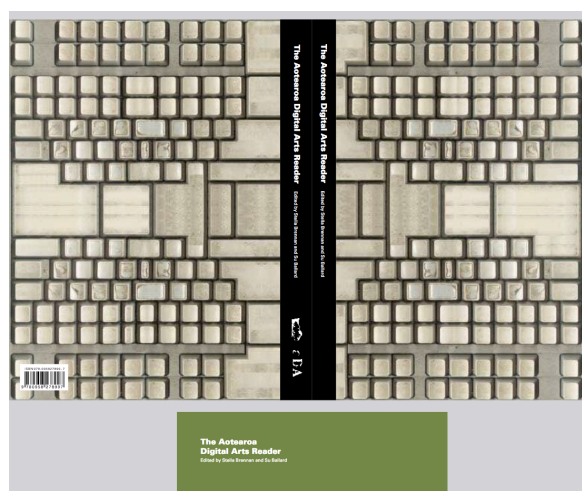

Fig 3. Cover of The Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader, Published by Aotearoa Digital Arts and Clouds, 2008.

A pivotal point in the developing timeline of the ADA community was the Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader. Called 'a sampler' by one of its editors, the reader provides a survey of accounts and artworks that present a slice of the discussions and practices of a community threaded around an email list discussing digital and new media art practice in Aotearoa New Zealand or by New Zealanders abroad and its semi-annual events.

Many of the voices in the reader were resonant of the earliest gatherings from which the ADA list sprang,

firmly locating the works and essays as the equivalent of a screengrab of Aotearoa digital arts circa 2008. Including a broad survey of digital tools and discussion of content and process, this work still remains a major resource for art historians today. The significance of these freeze frames on the flourishing field of digital and net.art culture. The timestamp nature of the work renders it a taonga (treasure) of intergenerational importance built on a localised and very particular network within the unique situation of being physically far but technologically very close to everyone and everywhen.

Woven into the construction of the ADA Reader is the artwork by Raewyn Turner titled *Perfumes of Fear*, edging the copy with a verdant survey of the lush and contaminated landscape of Taranaki with its historical burden of the production of the dioxin laden 245T.[3]
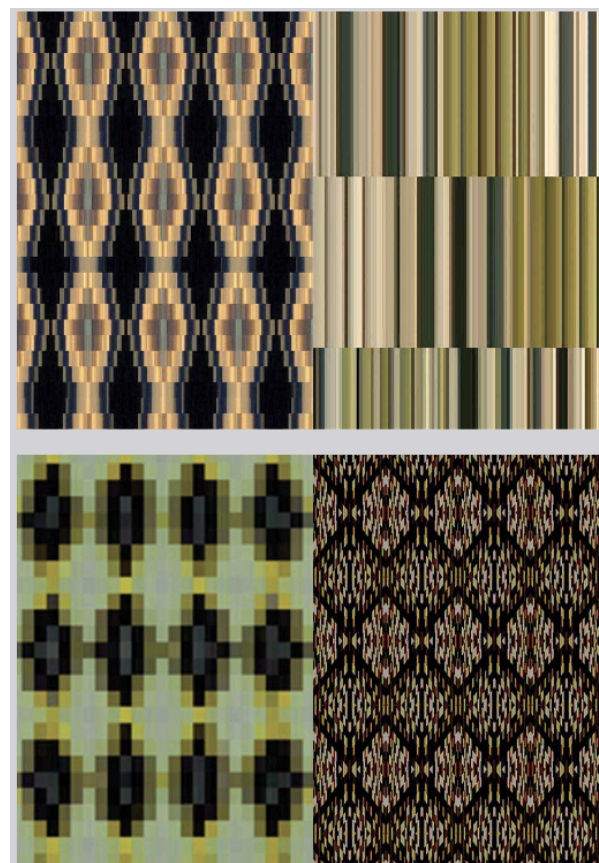

Fig 4. Lisa Reihana, *Kawhia & Kete #1, 22, 20 and 83*, 2007.

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[3] Raewyn Turner, *Perfumes of Fear,* 2008.
https://ada.net.nz/library/perfumes-for-fear-no-1-green/

Maree Mills in her text, Contemporary Māori Women's New Media Art Practice, makes many connections between the woven and the digital. Bounded by works by Lisa Reihana (also a digital artist in residence at Waikato) her essay situates the rapid adoption of technologies by tangata whenua (people of the land). Mills shares the artworks, story and practices to contribute to the communication of indigenous constructs, reclamation of knowledge and reinvigorate the telling to wider audiences.
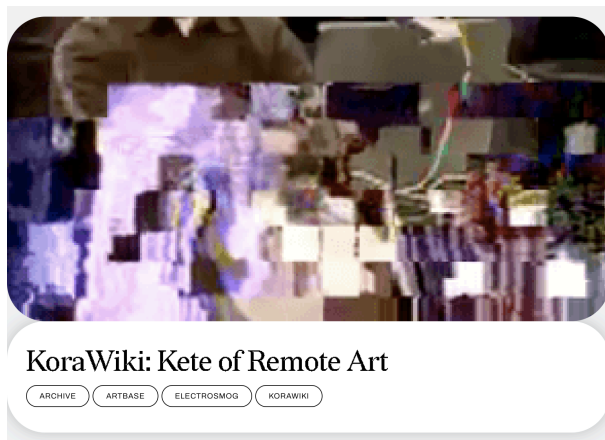

Fig 5. Screengrab of *KoraWiki: Kete of Remote Art* Artbase entry at ada.net.nz. Accessed 2024.

The ADA network continued to host semi annual surveys of its community through symposia extending across its local geographical reach and gathering within academic institutions and alongside aligned communities all the while documenting proceedings.The next significant change in the texture of the network came as part of the Electrosmog International Festival of Sustainable Immobility. Called the *Korawiki: Kete of Remote Art* ADA members were invited to contribute to a catalogue / kete of remote collaboration. The parameters were New Zealand-related projects using communications technologies to present, perform, and collaborate over time and distance. The self selecting community of the ADA network now had an archival tool it was from here the ADA artbase was formed.[4]

Over the next few years the ADA network continued to generated localised discussion, responding to significant events through creative research themes such as ADA

Mesh Cities. Building a series of symposia, works, master classes and a booksprint 'A Transitional Imaginary'. These threaded responses to the transitional, held across Aotearoa were post the series of catastrophic earthquakes situated in Ōtautahi / Christchurch. The network continued to maintain a semi-annual physical gathering however the ADA landscape itself was shifting.

Return to ARIs and DIY community

Fig 6. None Gallery, Dunedin, 2017, photo by Jon Keyzer.

Fig 7. Storm Channels poster, 2017. Photo by Jon Keyzer.

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[4] https://ada.net.nz/events/projects/korawiki-kite-of-remote-art/

Fig 8. 'How to Build a Magnetti' workshop by Brent Ryan, The Anteroom, Port Chalmers, 2017. Photo by Jon Keyzer.

Storm Channels was a 3-day event series hosted at six artist run initiates in Ōtepoti Dunedin in 2017. It was a project that ADA co-facilitated with artist Charlotte Parallel who lived and worked at the Anteroom Project Space in Kōputai Port Chalmers. The invitation to each of these ARIs was simply to host one of a 6-part programme that spoke to the ideologies of each individual space, given the opportunity and backing to try something they perhaps wouldn't otherwise do, or at least have the means to do.

It is important to recap and acknowledge how ADA has interfaced with events in the past. Prior to Storm Channels, ADA had a strong history of delivering high quality, critical symposia that leaned into a largely academic audience and participation that were often presented within university environments and equally attracted many working within them. In 2017, there was a noticeable shift in the makeup of the ADA Board of Trustees, being made up less of university academics, and more so of practising artists. As a board, we acknowledged this organic shift and there was a collective feeling and gesture for the organisation to focus energy away from traditional symposia, at least for a moment. The focus was directed to a more practice-led approach to an event that celebrated the large network of artists working with digital technology and digital cultures outside of formal institutions.

This was at a time through the 2010s when digital tools had become much more integrated and normalised within art practice as digital natives and ubiquitous technologies entered the art-making landscape and methodologies. The Storm Channels project was guided by a shift in thinking from the new in new media art to instead look at the consistencies within the wider field of emerging media practice. These consist of; community support, trial-and-error methodologies and an interest in new and alternative ways of working. All of these elements are

especially consistent when operating within an Artist-Run Initiative – at least in Dunedin.

Dunedin has a rich and interesting history of artist-run spaces, with a seemingly endless cycle of independent DIY venues, galleries, and studios popping up for an indeterminate lifespan at any given time. This has always been a strong support structure and influence for artists to trial ideas, experiment with materials and explore exhibition-making practice.

In 2017, there were six different ARIs identified that were operating each with unique styles and agendas which include; None Gallery, XXX/YYY, The Manor, Dirt, Savoy de Lacey and The Anteroom, none of which remain today. The Anteroom closed in 2024. Storm Channels was a way to celebrate this creative chaos and, through channelling the storm – so to speak – of independent art spaces, with a programme of events, exhibitions, workshops and performances to allow financial support to those working in ARIs and promote the magnitude that ARIs hold within a creative community.

I felt it was an important kaupapa for ADA to be involved with because it brought together a broad range of practitioners, from video works, installation, sound, projection, hands-on workshops and a helium-lifted drone that live-streamed the entire three-day event – all with an ethos of DIY and skills sharing. A core concept of Storm Channels was to bring together and celebrate ARIs in the city and to demonstrate how the importance of resource and knowledge sharing was synonymous with ideas within online communities and digital arts practice, where often using either old or new technologies requires a network of support.

ADA has always been proudly regionally diverse in the make up our trustees and members. The organisation values the structure that supports all members, no matter their location either urban or rural, north or south. As an organisation without one physical location, such as a gallery or office. For Storm Channels, it was an important element to work alongside the Anteroom and connect physical spaces with active practitioners.

Storm Channels was an exciting and timely project for ADA to be a part of. It formed an opportunity to reflect on community practice and the spirit of the DIY approach. Digital arts practice is always exciting in the way that it is slippery and often difficult to define. Regularly, digital arts and 'cutting edge' technology go hand in hand, linked together by industry collaborations. Storm Channels was an opportunity to celebrate a fundamental network of artists and the spaces in which

they live, which are both difficult to define yet dynamic in their results.
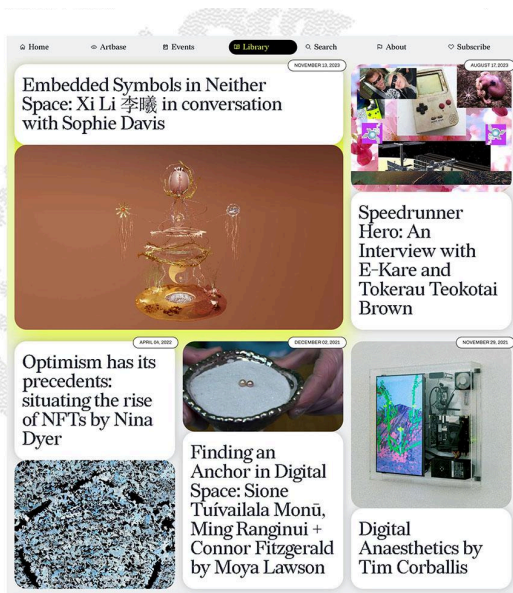
Symposia and publishing reboot

Fig 9. Screengrab, ada.net.nz/library. Accessed 2024

From 2018, the ADA organiastion began questioning again, "Where to next?" As a democratic and member-driven organisation, returning to the community through the Mailing List became an important way to speak with our members and to workshop how to best support digital arts practice in Aotearoa. This was achieved by inviting members to host a series of meet-ups throughout Aotearoa. These 'Open Sandwich' events were an opportunity to create an open channel and hear feedback and ideas from our members on how ADA could support our community. It was a brave and receptive project and we are grateful to our members for offering time, energy and support for the kaupapa of the organisation. It reassured the organisation that there was a need for various access points to engage with. These meetups gave the board confidence to put forward projects that prioritise platforms and opportunities for artists to contribute to, whether through public events, publishing and exhibition of work.

In 2021, ADA returned to the multi-year project model with the overarching title Indeterminate Infrastructures: Object, Signal, Architecture. The model of symposia creates a space where the forum it itself provides our

members with an important platform to be together, share and connect – which again, are many of the founding principles in which ADA was established. Indeterminate Infrastructures was bookended by two symposia in 2021 and 2022, a seminar series, commissioned publications, exhibition of online (born digital) works, a website refresh and relaunch enabling further additions to the artbase.

Fig 10. Dr Rewa Wright, Keynote address, 2022 ADA Symposium. Photo by Ted Whitaker.

Since our 2021 symposium, we have gained further momentum delivering symposia in 2022 and in 2024 alongside an even bigger programme of events and bringing in additional event partners. The format of a symposium helps us to create multiple access points for artists, academics and beyond. Important to our organisation is to continue to create a space for artists who sit either inside a gallery, outside the gallery or challenge conventional gallery and exhibition programme. Recent entries to the ADA Library reflect this kaupapa

and include interviews as well as commissioned articles about contemporary works.

The foundations laid by the ADA Reader, website and symposia have provided a space to reflect, return, validate and articulate an area of arts practice in Aotearoa that sits outside of all other institutions. While there are crossovers in themes, artworks and mediums through many visual arts organisations, this repository is a dedicated space for digital tools, art that intersects these digital methods and an ever-changing media landscape.

Conclusion

The Aotearoa Digital Arts (ADA) network is both a community aggregation and an archival gathering, reflecting and forming new connections in a self selecting fabric of genre defying arts practitioners and academics, One of the defining features has been in the permeability of the edges of ADA community its lack of stylistic distinction continuing the conversation across the ever expanding definition of the digital artist. During the last few years our national funding organisation has, within a review of how it processes grant distribution, also shifted the genre goalposts. Digital artists choosing artform have gone from seeing no separate distinction through New Media to Interarts to again having genre signifiers removed. Perhaps we have, as Douglas Bagnall described in the ADA Reader, achieved the greatest possible scenario of invisibility, complete ubiquity across all artforms that must include some digital,

How all these things come together the benefits of the broader remit to hang all the intersections across. Where to now with ADA. 2024 Symposium. New trustees. Funding model. Governance model. ADA is still continuing to map the NZ digital arts landscape locally and internationally.

Fig 11. Screengrab, Caroline McQuarrie Technical Object Seminar on the TC2 Loom, 2022.
https://ada.net.nz/tag/caroline-mcquarrie/
Accessed 2024.

The ADA artbase, its network and community continue to map the Aotearoa / New Zealand digital arts landscape local and international. New patterns reference old and new technologies and introduce the community to new forms of thread. Finn Petrie's 3D printed ceramic creating technical form for the biological suggests rather than the static tapestry the Aotearoa Digital Arts community may be more firmly situated in the place making aspect of the whariki, the mat on which we gather together and exchange and to weave the myriad of creative and critical strands. Access points from the digital social of the list, joining community at symposia, classes and events from local places and the digital expanses from which the ADA community gather.

We encourage you to join us on this digital mat laid out by the ADA community to research the events, access the readings and experience the archive in open exploration through the layers of thinking and creating and producing from the community of artists that make up the Aotearoa Digital Arts (ADA) network. ADA through its artbase and library of writings and its weaving of events from which much of the sharing of practice stems and extends. Thank you.

Author(s) Biography(ies)

Ted Whitaker is an artist based in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. He graduated from the Dunedin School of Art (MFA) in 2016. Recent exhibitions include; Oceans turn to goo, Toi Pōneke, 2020; Running in the Background, Te Tuhi, 2019; and Small Vision Playback, I: project space, Beijing, 2018. Ted has been an artist in residence at I: project space, Beijing and Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin.

Ted has been a trustee of Aotearoa Digital Arts Network since 2013 and has contributed to significant curatorial, administrative and systems projects for the organisation. These include, Storm Channels (2017), ADA Symposiums (2021, 2022 and 2024), Tech Object Seminar Series (2022), the redevelopment of the ADA website (2023) and the publication series (2022-2023).

Vicki Smith is an artist from Harihari, Aotearoa (NZ), a remote rural community. Her ancestral heritage is primarily celt. She is attached to Te Wai Pounamu (South Island) through the bones of ancestors for several generations and connects to forebears in Scotland, Ireland, England and France.

Vicki has a diverse working background across science, education and community. Her practice employs considered media to create positive active engagement in environmental care and restoration, with recent projects deploying multiple access points through creating field guides, events, games, walks, restoration work and Story Maps. artecology.net || sounding.nz || healthystreams.nz

Her collaborations in performance and digital communities include Aotearoa Digital Artists (ADA) Network - ada.net.nz (as member since 2003, trustee from 2012 and Chair from 2022) Avatar Body*Collision* 2001 and UpStage (co-founder 2002) upstage.org.nz