

Kurt Brereton, "Download Love Code - DNA", Laserprint, 100 x 150cm, 1999.

We are witnessing a strange confluence of technological philosophies between one of the most ancient of arts (textile design) and web design. Every fibre artist already knows how the web works even if they have never surfed before. Weaving and knotting threads together is analogous to hyperlinking images and words across the net. It is then perhaps no surprise that a digital artist (Kurt Brereton) and a textile artist (Diana Wood Conroy) have joined forces to lead a new digital art research project that brings together design and the visual arts.

The Virtual Art Gallery Project is a research initiative from the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong in Australia. One of the significant outcomes of this project is the development of a new software application titled Virtual Art Gallery. The software will be able to be downloaded from the web.

Drag and drop galleries

After an initial survey of current on-line galleries across the web, a second survey targeted a range of actual commercial, state run and community driven galleries with the aim of finding out what they wanted a virtual art gallery to provide for them. A prototype gallery was then constructed to test levels of interactivity, ease of use and interest among users. Over 90% of current web based galleries have very poor levels of interactivity and creativity especially regarding the use of images and sound. The vast majority of sites depended on conventional analog metaphors such as the photo album to display work rather than utilising the unique capabilities of a virtual exhibition medium. It was quickly recognised that what was needed was an easy to use "drag and drop" application that could quickly deliver a variety of gallery environments (eg sculpture garden, white cube or

cyber gallery) for the web or on CD. The application is designed primarily for artists and galleries who wish to display current exhibition material or build an archive data base of past shows or build CVs for individuals.

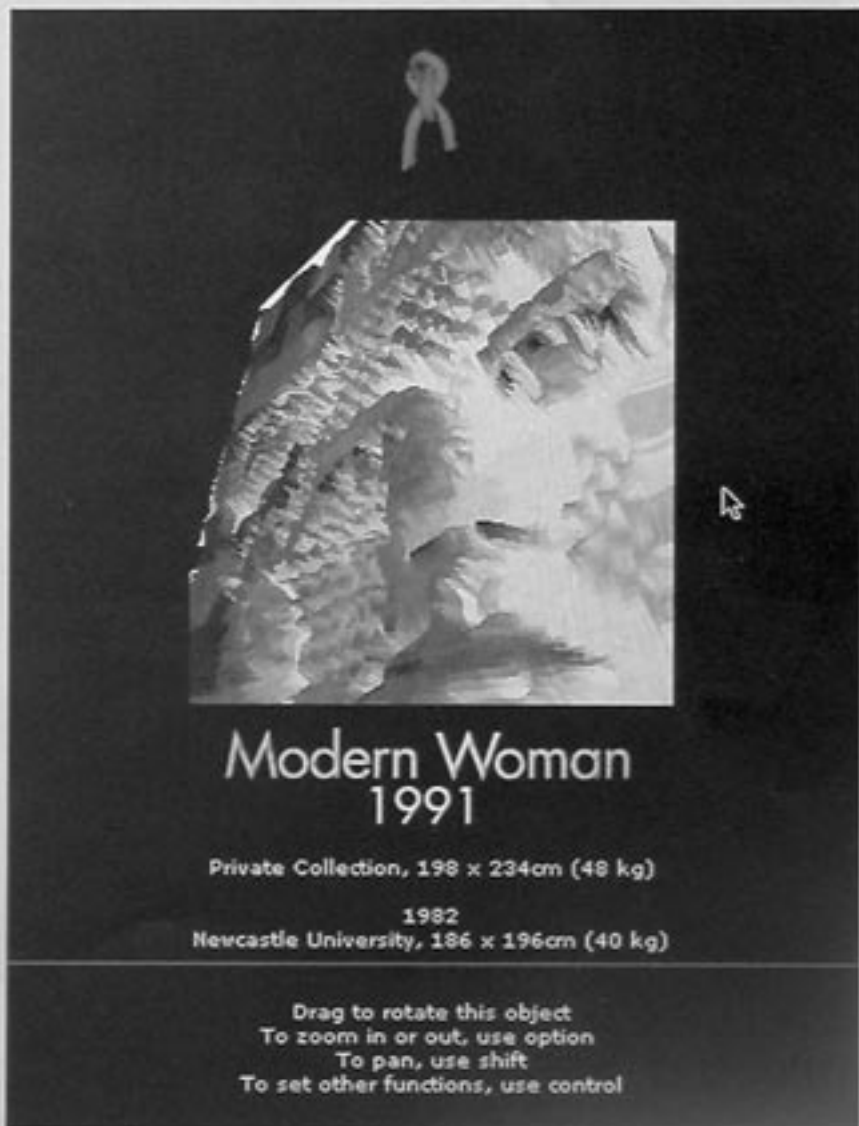
Interactive art

Fully utilising the unique features of the web means taking advantage of hyper linking, interactivity, data base resources and multimedia environments. Most people will initially be attracted to the simplicity of the program. You simply drag images into picture frames and type text into boxes that have been already mounted for you in a gallery room or garden setting. Yet the research impetus for undertaking the project was driven by a perceived need for a truly virtual gallery where viewers can interact with works and art direct their own new works using raw material (text, images, sounds, graphics) from within the program or connected web sites.

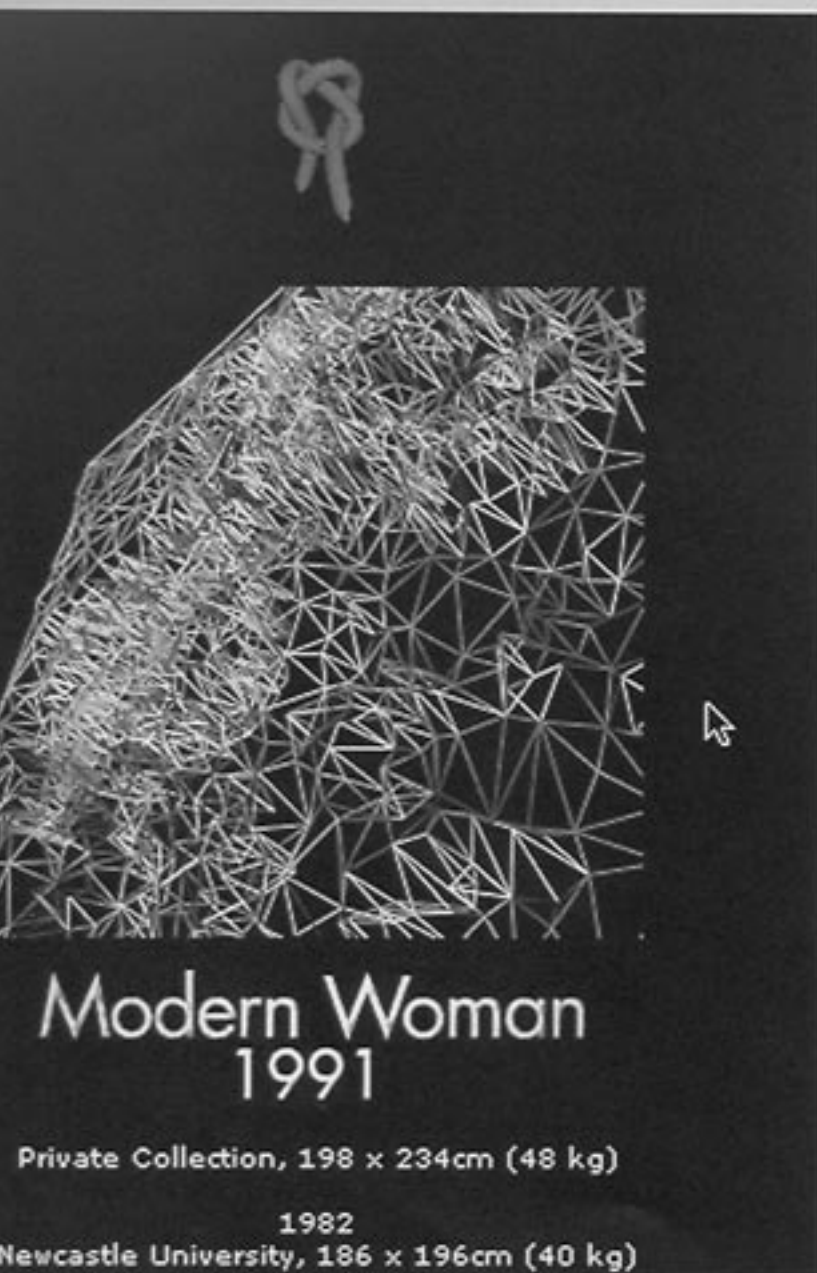
Research finding indicate that only 6% of on-line galleries make good use of interactivity while only 11% of galleries have explored sound and video media options. This state of play can only be partly attributed to the slow band rate modems and early version browsers. Another significant factor is what may be dubbed the culture of ease that drives the consumption of information on the web. If surfers have to wait more than a few seconds, or stop and download a plug in, or think about the vagaries of navigation, then the game is up. Given the obvious ergonomic, social and financial drawbacks of web surfing, the big advantage the web has over the actual world just as radio, TV and telephones did before it, is the collapse of time and space limitations. Hence the emphasis on marketing the speed of delivery and global transgressions of national borders. What separates the web from other media is the ability to interact with multimedia information in real time irrespective of time and space.

The knot and the pixel

In many ways the web can be thought of as a crazy-patterned knotted tapestry of seemingly chaotic threads that when seen from a distance maps out a intricate and beautiful image. While the overall rhizomatic fabric of the web looks bewilderingly complex the basic building blocks



Detail of 3D modelled image of knotted tapestry, Modern Woman 1991, by Janet Brereton. Constructed on Bryce by Hilary Rhodes.



map of 3D modelled image of tapestry *Modern Woman*1991, by Janet Brereton.
Constructed on Bryce by Hilary Rhodes.

and structure of the weave is very simple. The simple half-hitch knot is the basic unit for every macrame artwork. The pixel is likewise the basic unit for every digital image. Both knot and pixel are digitally driven. The knot can be reversed to produce different patterns and the digital image is made up of zeros and ones. Just as every piece of fabric is built up by combining the binary juxtapositions of warp and weft threads so too is the digital image built up by switching on or off a tiny electronic signal.

The web is a textile

The web is plural by nature and so is a piece of fabric. The threads of every woven bolt of cloth go beyond the pattern. They trail in a fringe begging to be reconnected to another fragment of fabric. In a sense all fabrics are of the same cloth just as all images are of the same web. The web is diffuse, an inexhaustible open fabric of signifiers, a seamless weave of codes and fragments of codes through which the reader must cut her or his own bias. All texts, be they written or woven, are woven out of other texts - every word, image, piece of music is a reworking of other texts which precede or surround it. All art is, in this sense, intertextual and to greater or lesser extent also interactive.

The meeting of arch analog craft and super digital virtual will be fully witnessed with the next generation of computing technology. The advent of wearable computers - digital garments, and bio-implants, will unleash a boom in new media design and art. It will also challenge the traditional notions of what craft and art are and what science and technology are. The development of the virtual art gallery project is a tiny step in realising the opportunities made possible by digital technology and the vast resources of knowledge and experience that crafts people and artists can bring to the virtual world ■

Kurt Brereton