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THREE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN DIGITAL PRINTMAKERS

The hand that guides the mouse is the same hand that guides the etching tools.

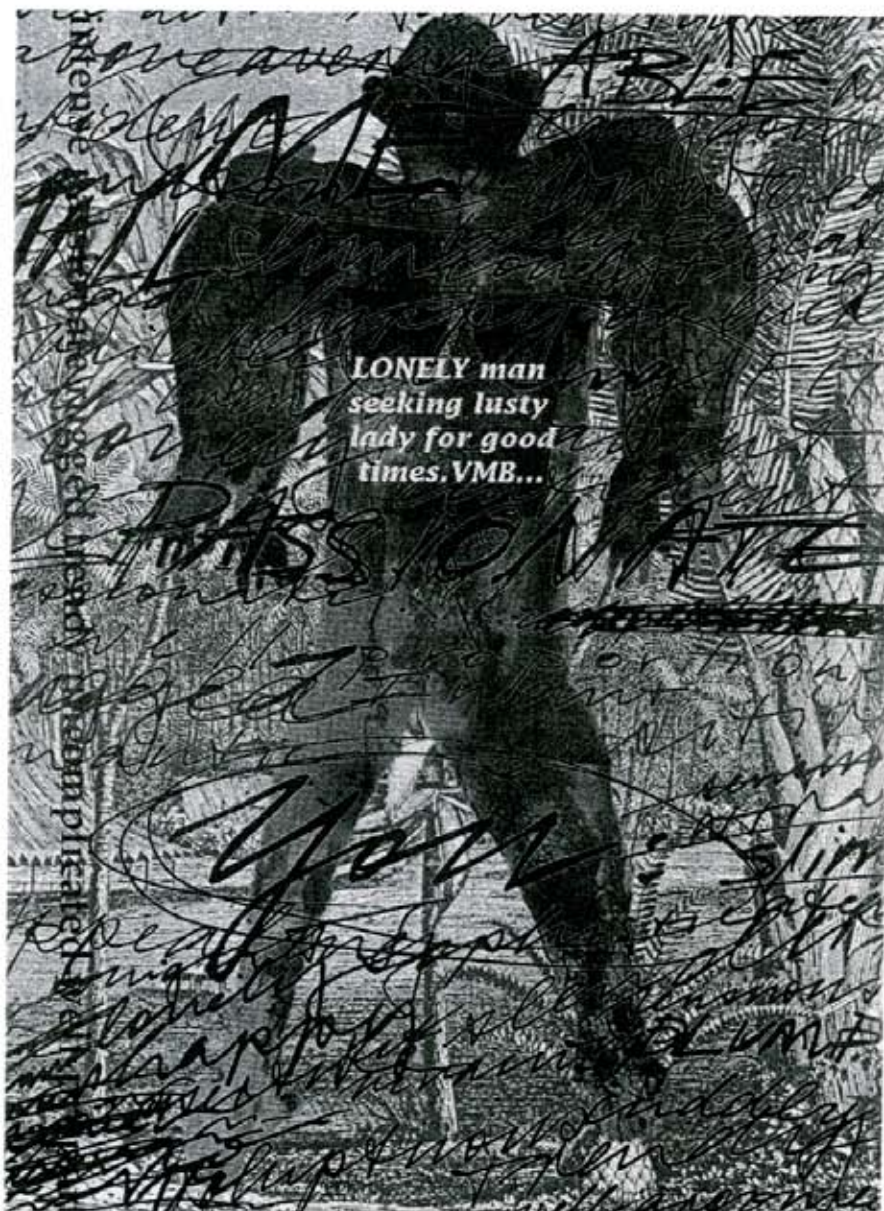
Catherine Speck

Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours. But the amazing growth in our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge or power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.

Paul Valéry *La Conquête du l'ubiquité* (1924).

Thus wrote Paul Valéry, French poet, critic and essayist, in the early years of the twentieth century when modern art seemed limitless in terms of changing forms and styles. Two particular technological advancements of early modernism: photography and film, which Walter Benjamin then aptly described as a mechanical means of reproduction, challenged the nature of art.¹ Now, the advent of computer technology to artforms such as printmaking, represents the next logical step in the mechanical means of reproduction, and the next challenge to what constitutes the fine art print.

Recently, Sasha Grishin pointed how printmaking has quite naturally responded to computer-generated imagery, and in doing so has pushed the discourse of printmaking to new boundaries, revitalising and reasserting its "traditional role of



Olga Sankey *WISH YOU WERE HERE (detail)* 1998

Novajet print 112 x 10 cm overall

being the artform which employs the most recent technology, whether it be the printing press, lithography or photographic processes".² Grishin's optimism concerning digital imagery is shared by a number of Australian printmakers.

Three Adelaide-based printmakers and occasional collaborators, Dianne Longley, Olga Sankey and Shaw Hendry are fluent digital artists, each having risen above using the digital process as a 'techno fetish'.³ Longley has the longest record of working with computer-generated

imagery, having worked in this medium since 1992 and having exhibited her first digital print in 1993, and each printmaker treats the computer as simply another piece of equipment in the printmaking process.⁴

Olga Sankey's recent computer-produced image, *Wish You Were Here* (1998), is based on the text in the Personal Columns of newspapers and a scanned and manipulated found medical photograph. The work is executed as a series of eight images, joined in the postcard folder format and mechanically printed at a bureau on a Novajet printer. While Sankey is exploring how men publicly but anonymously search for friendship, companionship and sex, via the language they use in their advertisements in the Personal Columns describing their ideal woman; it is her subtle use of the digital process which has enabled her to experiment with a found image and fragments of text from newspapers. In some prints the physical body is paramount, in others the hand-written or typeset text with messages of searching has the primary focus. The multiple layering of fragments of text and image, the primacy given to textual image in some prints and visual image in other prints, and the co-existence of image

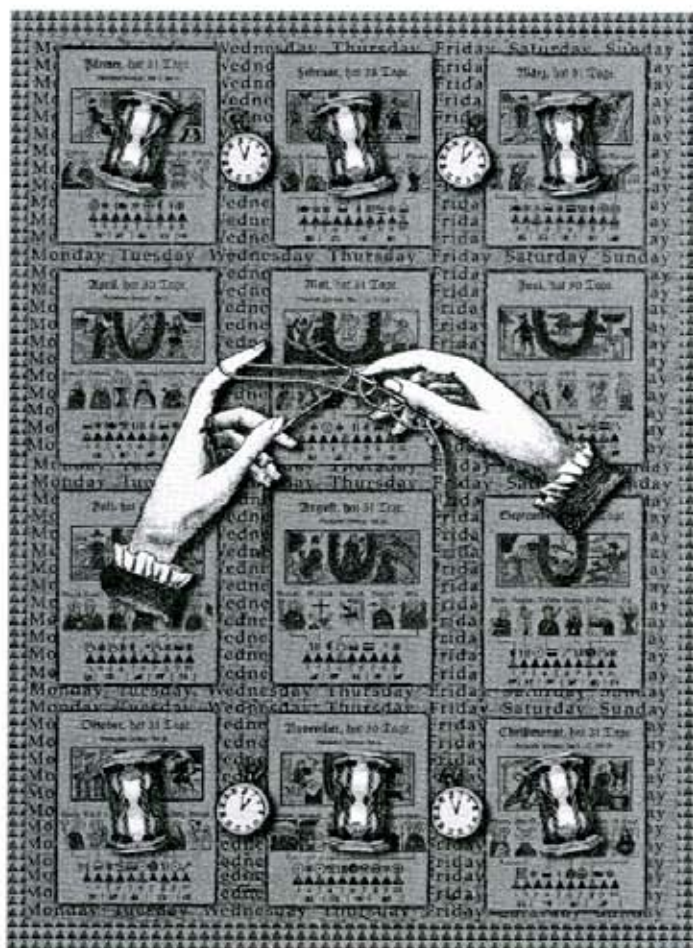
exciting: "It gives the printmaker the chance to peel away the layers of an image, it lets text and image bounce off each other, it permits multiple layering of the image and text and the opportunity to let as much text come through as you wish. In short, it is the luxury of experimentation that the digital process offers."⁵

critical agenda in her use of such imagery. In many of her digital works, Longley questions the cost of the move to virtual environments, in terms of the consequent loss of primary sensory experiences such as touch, sight and smell. This is a recurring theme in her exhibitions *Armorial*

(1995), *Traversing the Echo* (1996) and *Sensory Memorandum* (1998) with a number of works focusing on the above issues. Her virtual-reality gloves, *Armorial Data* (1995), symbolise the desensitised hands which tap endlessly at keyboards. These metal high-tech hands, which have become conveyors of information, are contrasted to the low-tech elegant, dexterous hands, shown in the frilly, printed fabric fringe of the data gloves. The hands of old used to sew, embroider and engage in elaborate finger plays. As Longley says, "computers create virtualities ... my recent work attempts to question our level of engagement with life as we strain to hear the distant echoes of reality."⁶

Longley has been equally critical of the rush to CD-ROM forms of information storage and retrieval. Her electronic book *Oceans of Information, Casting the Net*, draws attention nostalgically but lovingly to outmoded bookish learning, where a finite amount of knowledge is

encased between covers. One of Longley's most successful uses of digital imagery has been in the production of the artist book, in which she has combined the best of the old technology, the physicality of a book, with



Diane Longley THE PURSUITS OF A LIFETIME CAN'T BE RECORDED ON CALENDARS 1996 from COMPASS OF CHANGE artist's book, Novajet print 30 x 1650 cm overall

Dianne Longley is an established and consummate computer-based printmaker. Her works demonstrate a fluency in the use of a personal lexicon of computer-aided imagery, but there is also a socially



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GEELONG ACQUISITIVE PRINT PRIZE

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Entry forms available from the Geelong Art Gallery.

Exhibition of selected prints will be held at the Gallery from 13 June until 12 July, 1998.

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Shaw Hendry AND OR NAND NOR NOT, 1996
relief photo-polymer 29 x 42 cm

the advantages of the new: the relatively quick production of limited-edition digitally produced and printed artist books.

As one who is wholly conversant with the new technologies, Dianne Longley questions, muses and looks beyond the technology to engage in a sophisticated probing of the computing era via her subversive use of digital printmaking. Her artist books, each a digital image archive, are a delightful and resolved combining of the old technology of book production with new forms of designing and producing printed images. But look carefully at the images such as *The Pursuits of a Lifetime Can't be Recorded on Calendars* (1996).

Shaw Hendry's application of computer-based printmaking methods takes another turn: his focus is on creating virtual, three-dimensional environments. Consider his *And Or Nand Nor Not* (1996) — he creates a surreal environment of old and new elements which co-exist, and in the language of circuitry, there is flow between these two modes of being. The hammer, the basic tool of many a sculptor, is usually held by a real hand but for Hendry, it is the hazy, virtual hand of digital space which beckons.

Hendry is a mixed-media artist who is enthusiastic about the possibilities of digital printmaking where his method is one of editing and manipulating. As he says, "I cut, paste, stretch and filter the

various elements within the work ... As a painter finds that a particular brush moves the paint this way or that, I find aspects of a digital program that suit my purpose and I add them to my palette."

The mechanical means of reproduction that digitally-based printmaking offers is exciting and resolved in the works of Sankey, Longley and Hendry. Each is producing prints which are lead by ideas, the means of production simply aids the ideas. But as Shaw Hendry reminds us: "There is romance to using traditional tools that leads artists to cling to them. That we haven't romanticised the computer yet is no reason not to make use of it." *

Dr Catherine Speck is a Senior Lecturer in Visual Art History and Theory, at the South Australian School of Art, University of South Australia.

NOTES

- 1 Benjamin, W. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, Fontana, 1970, p.223.
- 2 Grishin, S. *Australian Printmaking in the 1990s*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1997, p.7.
- 3 Barstow, C. and Gates-Stuart, E. 'Being Digital', *Imprint*, vol. 31, no. 4, p.24.
- 4 Longley exhibited her first digital print in 'Art Beyond South East Asia', Singapore Art Fair, 1993.
- 5 Olga Sankey interviewed by the author, 12 February 1998.
- 6 Dianne Longley, artist's statement, 7 February 1998.
- 7 Shaw Hendry, artist's statement, 8 February 1998.
- 8 *ibid.*

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