

# THREE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN DIGITAL PRINTMAKERS

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

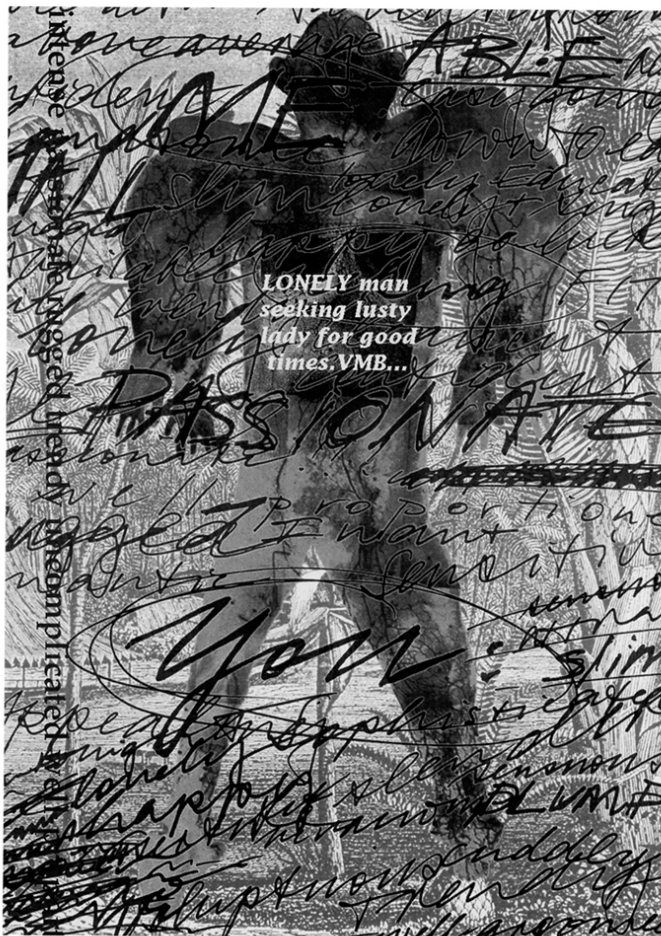
Catherine Speck

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 de 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

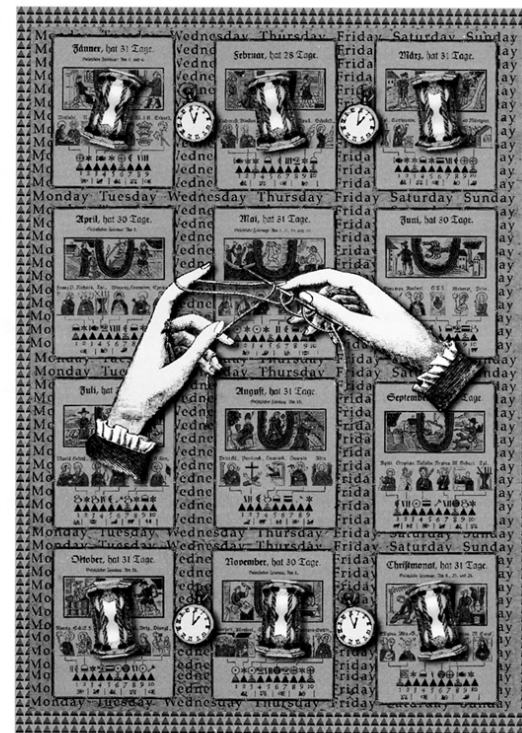
being the artform which employs the most recent technology, whether it be the printing press, lithography or photographic processes".<sup>2</sup> Grishin's optimism concerning digital imagery is shared by a number of Australian printmakers.

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'.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 and text in others, give the work a complexity and depth not possible if executed by conventional print methods. As Olga Sankey says, the possibilities offered by the digital process are most

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."<sup>5</sup>



Dianne 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

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 de-sensitised 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."<sup>6</sup>

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



GEELONG ART GALLERY

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GEELONG ACQUISITIVE PRINT PRIZE  
Sponsored by the Gallery Grasshoppers

The Geelong Art Gallery invites artists to submit prints for the 1998 Geelong Acquisitive Print Prize. This is an acquisitive prize to be conducted by the Geelong Art Gallery. Prizes totalling \$3,000 will be offered.

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.

LITTLE MALOP STREET, GEELONG VICTORIA 3220 TELEPHONE (03) 5229 3645, FACSIMILE (03) 5221 6441