

# Interface

Visions of the body and

the machine

Kathy Cleland

The last decade of the twentieth century saw an unprecedented surge in the use of computer-based new media technologies around the world, and this trend is set to continue at an accelerating pace in the twenty-first century. Australian and New Zealand artists have been quick to exploit the potential of new technologies. Indeed, it is artists who have often been at the forefront of experimentation with new media technologies, pushing the limits of both their technical and aesthetic boundaries. This article profiles the work of five artists based in Australia and New Zealand. With diverse art backgrounds ranging from sculpture to photography to traditional Maori weaving, these artists have incorporated a variety of new media technologies in their art practices.

In Australia the support of funding bodies such as the Australia Council (New Media Arts Fund) and the Australian Film Commission (Interactive Multimedia Fund) as well as various State funding agencies, play a significant role in supporting innovative and conceptually challenging uses of new technologies by artists. The Australian Network for Art and Technology (whose initiatives predate those of both the Australia Council and the Australian Film Commission) has been particularly instrumental in providing training for artists wanting to learn new media skills and in encouraging a critical discourse among its practitioners. Universities too have been quick to integrate new media technologies into both fine arts and design courses. Screen culture organisations such as dLux media arts in Sydney and Experimenta media arts in Melbourne, as well as the State-based contemporary art spaces, provide opportunities for new media artists to exhibit and screen their work.

In New Zealand there are slimmer pickings for new media artists, whose only source of funding is through the Creative New Zealand Screen Innovations Fund. The Moving Image Centre in Auckland is the primary organisation undertaking the exhibition and promotion of new media artwork, although exhibitions are also held at organisations such as Artspace in Auckland and the Physics Room in Christchurch.

## Maureen Lander and John Fairclough

Maureen Lander is a multimedia installation artist based in Auckland whose work incorporates traditional Maori culture and practice, a subject in which she also lectures at Auckland University. Lander has always been interested in using new materials and technologies in her work and in exploring how these can be integrated with traditional Maori cultural forms:

I have some Maori ancestry and am well aware that it has always been a [traditional] Maori response to embrace new ideas, materials and technologies and explore how these can be incorporated into the fabric of Maori culture. My combined Maori and Pakeha [European] ancestry also allows me to explore the tensions that can occur at the interface between the two cultures.<sup>1</sup>

Lander's installation art mixes indigenous materials such as flax fibre – prepared using pre-European technologies – with contemporary synthetic materials such as nylon fishing line. Light and different lighting

MAUREEN LANDER and JOHN FAIRCLOUGH, *Digital String Games*, 1998, interactive multimedia installation.



systems are an important feature of her work, and more recently she has also been using sound and moving image (video). A recent collaboration with artist John Fairclough, *Digital String Games*, 1998, has led Lander to integrate interactive multimedia technologies into her work.

John Fairclough's art practice has encompassed a range of disciplines, forms and media, but has always had a central emphasis on the kinetic ([www.jf.auckland.ac.nz](http://www.jf.auckland.ac.nz)). Fairclough is currently lecturing in digital media at the Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland and has been using the computer as a primary tool in his work since the early 1980s, soon after the first microcomputers became available and he learned how to write computer programs to create images. He has maintained a fascination with computer code and the various patterns and languages (the integrated parametric structures) that define the relationships of computer objects and systems and the ways humans and machines can 'talk' to each other across the human-machine interface: 'The act of "talking" to a machine (and having it talk back) also raises questions about the fundamental difference between "mechanism" and "organism", the nature of our own "programs" and the extent to which we are free to act.' Computers also have the advantage of being able to handle a range of different media types, such as 2-D and 3-D images, audio and animation within a single interface, and allow Fairclough to 'build dynamic systems beyond the limitations of the physical'.

The collaboration between Fairclough and Lander builds on an earlier work of Lander's called *String Games*, which was exhibited at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington during 1998 and 1999. This earlier work explored the use of string figures as a mnemonic in traditional Maori storytelling culture. For *Digital String Games* Fairclough has adapted software from a drawing system to enable the audience to manipulate digital strings. Via interactive handsets participants can create their own string-figure patterns against a background of Lander's installation of Maori string figures and European cat's cradle figures formed out of blue fluorescent string and illuminated by ultraviolet light. As connections are made and broken, the viewer is implicated in a cycle of creation and destruction.

Since her collaboration with Fairclough, Lander has gone on to incorporate other new media technologies in her work. An installation titled *www/chat/ipulkorero* at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Christchurch in 1999, included a tangible flax and 'wired' website. Small speakers were embedded in a large web-like structure suspended across the gallery, emitting the sound of Lander's daughter chatting on the Internet, keyboard tapping and voiced exclamations. These sounds were juxtaposed with those made by small flax pieces modelled on *ipu korero* – a traditional Maori artifact similar to the traditional *poi* – literally meaning a 'container for talk', resulting in a serendipitous mix of old and new technologies.