

„SUN, SEA AND SILICON CHIPS“
PROMOTING DIGITAL CULTURE IN THE SOUTH WEST OF ENGLAND

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Porthcurno, Western Cornwall.

A remote coastal village in the 1870s, surrounded by spectacular cliffs. Operators wait in their stations to receive and send messages by cable around the world. Transatlantic communication made possible by advances in telegraphic networks, each message dutifully translated to and from morse code, read by a galvanometer. The Victorian Internet.

Fast forward to the summer of 1997, when the American artist Paul Ramirez Jonas is invited to create a new artwork at Porthcurno as part of the major visual arts event *A Quality of Light*. He creates an installation that links historical devices with contemporary technology. A *camera obscura* captures an inverted image of the landscape and projects it on to a screen. A digital camera captures the same aspect and translates the image data into morse code. The code is 'relayed' over the Internet, where viewers around the world are able to see both the code and the image it represents. At Porthcurno, the code can also be read by an early galvanometer. The artist calls the work *PK*, the letters of the international telegraph code for Porthcurno.

This story reveals some of the many contradictions of my region, the South West of England. At first glance life here may appear remote and backward, lacking the sophistication and complexity of metropolitan life. For the many tourists who come here each year, it's a place of sun, sea and rural tranquillity. Yet look closer and you'll see that the region has always looked outwards not inwards, and provided a link between Old and New Worlds. In addition to its rich maritime heritage, technology has enabled the South West to build relationships with far-flung places around the globe. So perhaps it's not surprising that we now see the beginnings of a digital culture developing in the South West.

In my seven years as Director of Media and Published Arts at South West Arts, I've witnessed the birth and rapid growth of this digital culture. At times I've played a proactive role in facilitating developments in this area. During this time, I've worked closely with my colleague Simon Poulter, who as well as being a prominent artist in the UK and internationally, is also an experienced trainer and advocate for digital development. But I'm not here to tell you what my organisation has achieved. I'm here to describe a number of parallel developments in the region that are gradually converging to form a single vision. These developments bring together cultural, educational and economic concerns.

Before I discuss them, let me give you a brief geography lesson. The South West region covers 7,800 square miles – over 15% of the land area of England, with 635 miles of coastline. It's an area almost as large as Wales. There are important cities such as Bristol, Plymouth, Bath and Exeter, although many people live in smaller market towns or villages. The population overall is around 4 million people. 47% live in rural areas as compared to the national average of 18%. Population density ranges from 4000 people per square km in Bristol, to less than 50 per square km in rural Devon and Somerset. The South West is one of the fastest growing regions in the United Kingdom,

with population projected to grow 11% between now and 2016. However, it's also an ageing region with 49% of the region's population expected to be 45 or over in 2016.

The South West is an area of economic disparity. The north of the region has a large number of high tech and service industry companies, reflecting the importance of the defence, communications and media industries to the prosperity of the region. Bristol has the highest concentration of UK film and media interests outside London. This 'celluloid city', having established its international reputation in that field, is fast becoming a silicon city. Cornwall, by way of contrast, has few large companies and its traditional industries of mining, fishing and agriculture have been in decline for most of this century. Unemployment has reached as high as 12% in many towns and Cornwall's Gross Domestic Product is only 71% of the EU average. It has just been granted Objective 1 Status by the European Union.

First signs

„the information revolution is here. It's the Big Bang of our time –we might even call it the Bit Bang“
Steven Levy, 1995

When looking at the growth of digital culture in the South West over the last decade, it is difficult to pin-point where the initial impetus came from. The earliest developments were certainly sector-specific. By the beginning of the 1990s, Bristol was emerging as a high tech city with a specialism digital media and broadcasting. The BBC's national centres of excellence for Natural History and Television Features, based in Bristol, had developed a reputation for technical and creative innovation that is still the envy of the world. A cluster of specialist producers and technical support companies developed around the BBC's production base, providing a critical mass of creative talent and expertise. Companies such as Division, which specialised previously in virtual reality applications for the defence industry, now turned their hand to the entertainment and public broadcast sector.

The University of the West of England was one of the first higher education establishments in the region to seize the opportunities afforded by the new digital future. A partnership with Hewlett-Packard enabled a research faculty to be set up with artists investigating the creative applications of new software products. A project called *MEDIAworks* was also established by the University's Faculty of Art, Media and Design. The focus of this project is on media training and specialist consultancy for companies wanting to use the Internet for business. State-of-the-art animation and multimedia workstations, television and sound facilities make *MEDIAworks* the largest media training organisation in the South West region.

The ICT explosion

„the information superhighway is now so vast that it has its own horizon“
Bill Viola, artist, EVA California, Los Angeles 1998

The South West, like other regions, has been swept up in the race to become a lead player in the information revolution created by the increased accessibility of personal computers and global communication systems. The slogan 'information is power' is the rallying cry of those who want to 'wire up' all schools and businesses to improve the region's competitiveness in world markets by dint of raising the level of computer literacy among the domestic labour force.

In the South West, this led initially to a wave of capital investment, much of it matching European funding. It resulted in over forty small, locally based ICT centres across the region. Various described as ICT resource banks, business and technology units and telematics delivery centres, these centres tend to offer community and business access to computer hardware and technical assistance with web-site development, on-line marketing and other aspects of corporate communications.

It is fair to comment that the availability of these resource centres in the South West is helping to change people's ideas about the workplace, and the skills required there. But has it fundamentally

changed transformed the way we work? I would say not. The paperless office remains a future prospect, and only a few regional companies have restructured their business activities to operate effectively in a global marketplace.

Defending the Imagination

„The apparatus, the hardware, is of no importance in this story; the machines will certainly not survive. At least the images will survive in many minds, and will be passed down “

Rudy Luijters

In my opinion, the first wave of ICT development in the South West was too hardware-driven. It failed to recognise that development is as much about creating a vibrant and diverse digital culture as it is about giving people the pre-requisite tools and technical training.

It was this concern that led me to form a regional Artists and Technology group in 1995. This included fifteen artists, film-makers, designers, musicians and performers who shared an interest in the creative application of new technology. As a group, we sought to redress what we perceived to be a huge imbalance in the region between finance and resources committed for ICT and hardware development, and the resources needed for a broader electronic education and more creative use of technology in the cultural sector.

In my experience, artists are among society's most skilled and intuitive problem-solvers. The regional Artists and Technology group proved no exception to this rule. Within 18 months, under the project name *Imag@nation*, the group had organised a series of events and projects that radically altered the profile of digital media, and perceptions about the relationship between arts and technology, within the region's cultural sector. This included two Showcase events in Bristol, offering audiences an opportunity to view the latest web art and multimedia work. A Digital Roadshow, sponsored by AppleMac Western, introduced people in six isolated rural communities to digital creativity using Director, Photoshop and Avid software. An eight day *Imag@nation* residential event at Dartington College, Devon, in November 1997, allowed 15 artists from various disciplines to explore the creative use of technology without the pressure of producing a finished piece of work.

Reaping the Rewards of Success

Imag@nation secured a £375,000 government award in late 1997, enabling a new company called DA2 – the Digital Arts Development Agency – to be set up. DA2 has a regional remit to commission and present new artworks involving digital technology, and to develop wider audience engagement with new technology-based arts practice.

On a sub-regional level, other independent projects have since been established to develop the creative use of technology and carry forward the objectives identified by the *Imag@nation* project. I would particularly like to highlight *PVA/New Networks* in Dorset, an artist-led, not for profit organisation. *PVA/New Networks* delivers a comprehensive range of creative workshops from web and multimedia design to digital video and music production. *PVA/New Networks* is also concerned with aesthetic and social issues, and runs critical seminars tackling such subjects as digital curation and the political context of artists' work on the Net. The organisation also held a highly successful artists' residential event in the summer of 1999 called *LabCulture*, with an open-ended agenda and emphasis on creative collaboration and interdisciplinary work.

Where to Now?

Some people have compared the application of ICT in society to the introduction of electricity to industry, pointing out that electricity was not used effectively until 20 years after the first power station came on stream.

I feel we must establish a digital culture in our region much quicker than that, as the pace of technological advancement is so fast that it's outstripping our ability to devise new applications and

to create worthwhile content for this protean environment. The Internet is being viewed as the 'cutting edge' of cyberculture. With the progressive convergence of television, radio, information and entertainment services through the Internet, Nicholas Negroponte's vision of a 'single media machine, with no geopolitical boundaries' no longer seems such a distant dream. On-demand media will increasingly replace real-time broadcasting. In the case of the cultural sector, production processes and distribution strategies will need to be carefully formulated to meet audience needs.

What is encouraging is that the agenda in the South West is finally moving away from its earlier preoccupation with hardware and purely technical training. The South West Regional Development Agency identified in its 1999 prospectus that 'innovation, creativity and technology lie at the heart of the region's future'. Several public sector organisations are responding to this challenge. The University of Plymouth and Falmouth College of Arts both plan to establish major new centres for digital arts and technology. These will focus on CD and DVD-Rom authoring, interactive media publishing, audio-visual design and content creation for the Net. They will also act as 'hot-houses' for the development of creative businesses.

New regional networks such as *The Learning Connection* and *Peninsula Interactive Media* emphasise life-long learning for individuals and businesses in the area of information and communications technology. Their web-sites and bulletin boards give people direct access to specialist learning providers and on-line learning materials, expert information and advice, useful web addresses and other relevant contacts.

Towards a Single Vision

„The role of art has always been to demonstrate and celebrate interconnectedness“

Gary Snyder

Much of this digital development has been fragmented and sporadic, lacking effective co-ordination. How the region's economic, cultural and educational agendas will come together remains unresolved. With the digital arm of the 'creative industries' embracing such diverse interests as software design, computer games and entertainment arts, broadcast media and publishing, it's perhaps unsurprising that no one body is seen as having a comprehensive overview of digital developments in the South West.

This means that networks and federal structures have an essential role both in maintaining dialogue across sectoral boundaries and supporting the exchange of good practice. Artists and designers need to talk to programmers and engineers, those in the education and training fields need to work together to foster a life-long learning culture around these emergent technologies. As somebody working in the arts, I see my role as promoting the concept of interconnectedness rather than divergence. We must try and weave the many discrete strands of activity into a coherent whole.

And just as the Victorian telegraph operators in Porthcurno kept alive the region's links with the rest of the world, we must see the promotion of digital culture in the South West as an international concern. For that reason, I am keen to develop links between the South West and other regions worldwide that are undergoing a similar transition. The notion of interconnectedness within the arts and media, and interdisciplinary practice, will be explored in a major international conference that South West Arts is promoting in Autumn 2000, as a contribution to the national Year of the Artist.

We have much to learn from each other, through the sharing of respective experiences in this complex and fast-moving arena. By working together, we – artists, cultural planners, educationalists and citizens - can shape the digital future for the good of society as a whole, and ensure that cultural concerns direct rather than serve commercial agendas. As the futurologist Robert Anton Wilson has remarked, „ *The future exists first in **Imagination**, then in **Will**, then in **Reality***“. And for the immediate future, at least, the only limits appear to be the extent of our imagination and the strength of our will to make things happen.

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David Drake is a writer on a range of arts and cultural issues. He is also Director of Media and Published Arts for South West Arts, the regional arts board for the south west region of England.

Since graduating twenty years ago from the School of African and Asian Studies, University of Sussex, he has worked extensively in the arts and media sector. As well as direct experience of video production and editing, he was Director of Pimlico Arts and Media from 1983-1992. This was a major centre for video and television, photography and graphic design, supported by the European Social Fund and central and local government funding. He joined South West Arts in 1992. Recently, he has turned his attention to studying the impact of digital technologies on arts and media practice. Having successfully co-ordinated an artists and technology network, he led the development of a project called Imag@nation focusing on artists' use of the Internet, multimedia and interactive technology.

In 1998, he was awarded a Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship to research artists' use of technology in Canada and the United States.