

Anthropo-ecosophy

Artists have always been among the first to reflect on the culture and technology of their time. The so-called 'digital revolution' that has transformed society since the 1990s has been actively embraced by artists worldwide. While the digital medium was considered peripheral at the end of the twentieth century, at the beginning of the new millennium it has become an integral part of the mainstream art world. Technological art forms (now known broadly as digital art) ranging from interactive installation with or without network components, Internet-based art, digital film, video and animation to sound and music have become established media and museums and galleries around the world are collecting and organising major exhibitions of digital work.

Emerging from the breakthrough in the 1960s and 1970s of computer art, which led artists such as Richard Hamilton and David Hockney to work interactively with displays on screens in what amounted to relatively direct 'painting' techniques, and then multimedia art, digital art has now reached such a stage of development that it offers entirely new possibilities for the creation and experience of a broad range of work. Whether used as a tool for the making of photographs, prints or music or as a medium being produced, stored and presented exclusively in the digital format and utilising its own dynamic and interactive aspects, digital art is by its nature extremely fluid and hybrid. Challenging traditional notions of the artwork, audience and artist, digital technology collapses the boundaries between the way we approach and understand art today. The aesthetic language and manifestations of digital art expand and challenge contemporary artistic practice even as the forms and themes of the medium still constantly evolve.

Melbourne artist Steve Danzig has championed the use of digital media as a creative mode since the late 1980s. During this period he began to experiment with the interactive potential of new technologies. In particular, he became increasingly interested in the intersections between art and technology. Danzig has employed digital technologies as an artistic medium to address issues extending from Jungian archetypal psychology to social and cultural matrices relating to religion, sexuality and socio-political metaphor. In the seminal photo-media series *Dark Eros* 2002-03, the artist's interest in early European religious art is articulated in imagery exploring sexual iconography within a perverse and poly-sexual fetishist framework. The use of constructed sets provides a visual effect reminiscent of early cinematography or operatic stage design. Danzig has also collaborated with a number of artists working with computerised imaging including the American digital artist Laurence Gartel and other leading contemporaries such as Paul Brown, Stephen Jones, Leah King-Smith and Tony Robbin.

A number of themes in digital art are in many ways specific to the digital medium. That is not to say that these ideas do not appear in more conventional modes or that digital media do not embrace issues that have been dealt with by artists in the past. The theme of artificial life,^[1] including the developing 'life-form', has become a prominent focus in the digital realm and is addressed broadly by Danzig in his recent major work *Anthropo-ecosophy* 2004-05. The project consists of digital prints, a soundscape/animation and an installation. The title is a mix of two words: anthropomorphic and ecosophy. The artist has stated: 'The term anthropomorphic is an attribution of human motivation, characteristics or behaviour to inanimate objects, animals or natural phenomena. I am presenting ecosophy as a point of reference that we might engage, assimilate or embody over time. "Anthropo-ecosophy" within the digital aesthetic questions this common thread of humankind versus nature via social, cultural, environmental and political consequences. Its metempirical position juxtaposed by laws of nature may direct humanity's destiny back to the early origins of life'.^[2]

Anthropo-ecosophy centres on the complex interplay between nature and human existence. Through a series of stills and video images, Danzig presents an arcane world of mutating life-forms, some jelly-like in structure others more humanoid in form that becomes a study of an evolutionary process. In this simulated environment, the connection between the physical and virtual world remains purposely ambiguous. There is an implicit sexual undertone throughout the work, intimated in the gestures and movements of the digital organisms and reinforced through the sound of intermittent and intense 'breathing' in the video. Here, luminiferous

medusae ascend eternally upwards towards some invisible surface or distant light. Swimming in an amniotic sea of magenta and ashen-grey liquid, the soft flaccid forms evoke something germinal even rudimentary, somewhat akin to motile cellular activity or symbiotic interaction. This sense of a beginning or starting point is seemingly analogous to the origins of life itself. The sea is where life is thought to have developed and the source of human life. As the Sydney academic and digital artist Stephen Jones has pointed out: 'It is the basis of the saltiness of our blood, the very reason our tears and sweat taste salty'.^[3] But in the context of the computer-generated, immersive world created by Danzig, this theme assumes added meaning. Considered in an abstract, conceptual way, *Anthropo-ecosophy* can be seen as a matrix for the development of new ideas and digital information (in this case the imagery itself) and thus as an impetus for a social and cultural evolution. This approach, which envisages ideas and cultural information as the focus of artistic explorations of artificial life, relates to several of the concepts expounded by early pioneers of computer technology like the American mathematician Norbert Wiener (1894-1964) who, in the 1940s, undertook comparative study of different communication and control systems in what is now commonly referred to as the science of cybernetics.^[4]

Like a living system, Danzig's animated aquatic environment seems to create itself. Each independent element demonstrates autonomous behaviour and charts the space in a lifelike and improvisational manner. His role in shaping artificial life is a complex one that addresses the inherent characteristics of digital technologies themselves: the possibility of infinite replication in varying combinations consistent with specified variables and the feasibility of programming certain behaviours such as the ascendant flow and transformation of the organisms. In this way Danzig's creative practice departs to some extent from conventional artistic modes in that it employs a set of aesthetics belonging exclusively to digital technology.

In the quasi-anthropomorphic images included in the series of digital prints, Danzig refers more explicitly to modes of generation and transformation. There is an archaeological 'feel' about these works with veiled references to mummified forms, primeval cultures, lost civilisations and cities. Buildings, streets and urban scapes merge with primitive life-forms, reflecting an arcane and ambiguous world. Viewed from a distance as if through an aperture, this world resembles some subaquatic or interplanetary cosmos where organisms, beings and sites coalesce to form something greater and more universal. It is territory which is simultaneously familiar and unknown, where the viewer is invited to reflect on issues relating to nature, life and human existence through referencing the past and also by questioning contemporary culture's actions and practices relative to its own bionetwork. Danzig's virtual ecosystem is a reminder of the complexity of any life-form (whether organic or artificial) and of our role in shaping life both real and imaginary. By extension, his work visualises the process of evolution through evolved virtual creatures and systems which, like a living system, have the potential to replicate themselves.

Danzig's work focuses on concepts and ideas as opposed to material objects. He creates an artifice that results from the interplay of various digital media, incorporating dynamic visual and aural components. His work reflects and critically engages with present-day digital technologies. Referencing themes specific to the digital medium but which also possess a deeper social and cultural significance, Danzig constructs a virtual world of life-forms and structures which evokes aspects of physical reality. His art is indicative of the necessity to confront that reality as part of an intellectual and technological process that challenges how we define ourselves and the world around us currently and in the future. *Anthropo-ecosophy* might be seen as a pointer to possible directions for a 'technological future' where the intersection of art, technology and life is not only enhanced but shaped by multimedia elements and the digital medium as an important part of the transformation of culture.

Stephen Rainbird
Senior Curatorial Consultant
QUT Precincts, Brisbane

[1] Artificial life is the reproduction of biological processes or organisms and their behaviours

through

computer systems.

[2] Artist's statement quoted on the *Anthropo-ecosophy* website
<http://www.internationaldigitalart.com/>

Danzig/anthro.html. The site includes images, a soundscape/animation and an essay
'Anthropo-ecosophy Aqua' by Laurence Gartel.

[3] Quoted in Stephen Jones's unpublished article 'Steve Danzig: Anthropo-ecosophy', 31
January 2005.

[4] See Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the
Machine*
(second edition), MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965.