In search of the arts lane on the information superhighway

In January, Prime Minister Jean Crétien made a commitment in the throne speech to develop a Canadian strategy for the information superhighway. But many artists are already pioneering explorations of the new telecommunications technologies and "cyberspace" and their implications for the arts.

Canada has entered the era of computer-mediated communication, and artists are working with industry to bring their art to your personal monitor. An estimated half-a-million Canadians already have modems hooked up to their home computers. With the right software, these people can exchange text, images and sounds with similarly-equipped people around the globe, and very soon, exchange of video will also be commonplace. This Spring, Bell Canada will decide which Canadian community will receive its first home video-on-demand service that will allow consumers to pipe their movie choice directly to their televisions.

The increased use of this and other new technologies means that more artists will be working with private industry in collaborative artistic ventures. Arts funders have already recognized the importance of the new technologies for art and the need for this collaboration. The Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton's Arts Program, for example, has set up a new media category and a working team to look at arts and new technology.

Carol Sage, Manager of the Arts Program, said the new technologies "is an area that's absolutely going to be driven by the arts community working with industry and the private sector. I don't think the artists can totally control this domain by themselves. There just isn't enough money floating around for the artist to be able to do that. Artists are used to getting some support for their work, but now they're going to have to go to industry almost as partners in creating these artworks."

A key private-sector player in this collaboration is Stentor Alliance. Stentor, owned by the major telephone companies in Canada, is behind the development of the equipment used for the video-on-demand technology. Brian Milton, National Director of Social Policy for Stentor Telecom Policy Inc., said his industry needs to work with artists.

"Today we have a whole series of stand-alone companies - like telephone, computer and publishing companies, broadcasters, film producers - but this is changing fairly rapidly," Milton explained. "The traditional distinctions between these sectors are rapidly eroding." Telephone companies are looking for partnerships with cable companies, with computer companies, with software companies, and with content providers like publishers, film producers, musicians, artists and so on. The medium and the content are becoming one and the same thing."

"All these demarcations, walls, barriers are breaking down," he continued. "It's all going online, so there's the potential for a world where anyone can communicate with anyone else, anywhere, any time, in whatever form they wish. The potential of that kind of world is absolutely phenomenal."

One artist who has see that potential for more than a decade is Hank Bull, a Vancouver-based artist and writer recently cited in This Magazine as "the most enthusiastic electronic-mail artist in Canada." His projects with the Western Front's artists' collective include "Art's Birthday," in which artists around the globe communicate by computer networks to celebrate the supposed birthday of art on January 17.

In an e-mail interview about collaboration between artists and industry, Bull responded: "I don't know that collaboration is the word. Many who now have power will be disenfranchised by computer communications. Arts organisations are in danger of missing the boat. (In the US,) the Arts and Humanities have been pretty well left out of the Clinton Administration's document on the National Information Infrastructure (NII) and the situation in Canada is only a little better. While lip service is made to Canadian culture - sort of a rusty boiler plate text that you find in all policy documents - in fact government and industry have failed to see a role for the arts in the new order, to the point of denying them access."

Another artist concerned with access is Nancy Paterson, a Toronto-area artist and educator. Her work exhibited internationally includes Bicycle TV - an interactive installation of a viewer-controlled bicycle tour of scenic Canadian locations in which the rider controls the speed and direction of a real-time, full-motion video by pedalling and steering a stationary bicycle.

"Access to the information highway is of paramount importance - for myself as an artist and as a person interested in keeping my finger on the pulse and flow of information. And getting my hands on the tools of production is high on my list of things to do," Paterson stated in an e-mail interview, adding: "I think all artists must understand that counting on designers and developers with an allegiance to the military-industrial complex to be representative of the potential of these new media would be a terrible and irreparable mistake."

Clearly, there is a need for ongoing analysis into how the new technologies will affect artists and their work, and how artists can have an impact on the technologies themselves. An energetic proponent of research in this area is Michael Bussière, a composer specializing in computer music, an independent CD producer, and Director of the Electronic and Computer Music Programme at Carleton University. One of his current projects is a proposed centre for art and technology at the University. He said the centre could explore such questions as how to ensure that a sense of value is maintained in the art, "that it's not just sucked into the technology and the market."

The rapid rise of computer-mediated communication will make much more art available to consumers, but "one question is if it will make for better art or just for better industry," said Bussière, noting the trend of people consuming goods of less and less quality.

"It pushes you to think of the undefinable element of art," he continued. One of his classes has a mixture of students from art, engineering and computer backgrounds. Bussière has noted that some students with science backgrounds can rapidly digest thick technical manuals and propose new applications for the technology, but when it comes to the art, "they just don't get it."

Equally striking is that although many artists are embracing the new technologies, many others are not. At the end of his e-mail interview, Hank Bull wrote: "Many artists and art groups have failed to see the potential and the threat posed by telecommunications. They are like manuscript illuminators trying to survive in the age of the printing press. Meanwhile, a small network of media artists has been providing a meaningful critique of technology's impact on culture for many years. This group is now having a ball, surfing unafraid into cyberspace."