WORLD'S WOMEN ONLINE

World's Women Online is an Internet web site created in Wollongong for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing earlier this year.

The site is a graphical exhibit which is intended to display the work of Australian women from many disciplines, and to encourage women to use and consider new technologies.

Australia's display has been created in Wollongong and goes beyond the art brief to bring together the work of women in Australia from all walks of life. This electronic art networking project, which originated in Arizona, not only showcases women's creativity, but is also putting more women's voices on to the Internet, arguably a rather male-dominated arena.

Wollongong's World's Women Online is one of the largest web sites yet created in Australia, bringing together the work of artists, craftspeople, writers, researchers and theorists working in fields ranging from the performing arts, literature, craft, design and visual arts, to sociology, anthropology, information technology and education.

Four local women are curating the Australian display, which is located on an Internet site at the University. They are Sandy Indlekofer-O'Sullivan, Melinda Rackham, Ali Smith and Louise Manner. Sandy and Ali both recently graduated with a Bachelor of Creative Arts (Hons), and Louise is currently completing her honours year. Melinda is enrolled in a master of creative arts degree and Sandy is also completing her masters with honours. Louise was awarded an Honours Year Book Prize earlier this year by the Campus Alumni.
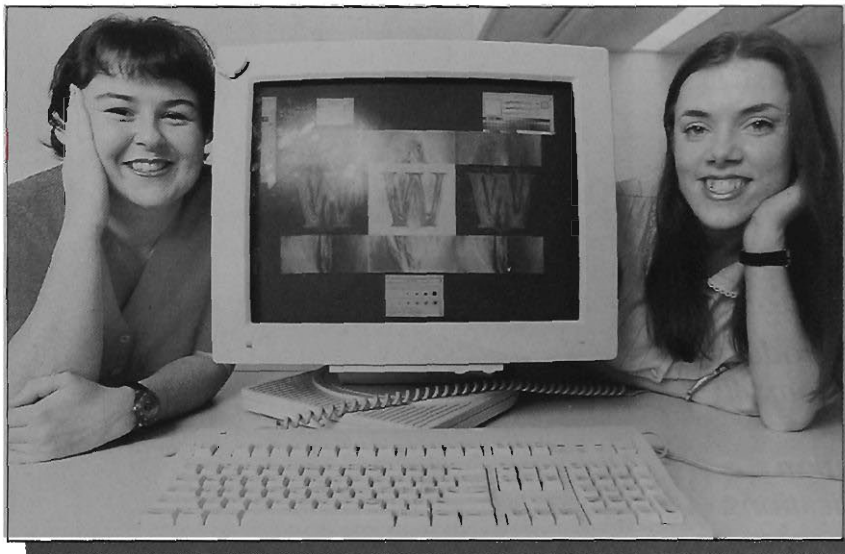
Wollongong's World's Women Online (WWWO) curators Melinda Rackham (left) and Louise Manner, with the Home Page of WWWO displayed on screen. Louise, who is completing her honours year in creative arts, was awarded one of the Campus Alumni Book Prizes earlier this year. Photo courtesy of The Illawarra Mercury.

The exhibition includes the work of about 30 participants from all over the country, the curators purposely attracting women whose work was not originally created for computer, but was later scanned in. This encouraged women without prior computer experience to participate. 'The Internet is important for artists for a lot of reasons,' says Sandy. 'It's not just for people working in computers.'

With worldwide web users now numbering around 120 million, the potential exposure for any artist is huge. Australian artists can use the Net to improve their profile overseas or to target particular groups of Net users. For women wishing but unable to attend the Beijing conference, the World's Women Online project offers an alternative opportunity to network.

The pieces of work are displayed in a magazine-style format, encouraging users to browse through them. From displays on the place of children in the family or a discussion of Korean feminism, to a journey through the virtual digestive system of artist Louise Manner, this exhibit is one of the most extensive and most innovative web sites produced in Australia. It is also one of the most accessible and diverse.

Ali Smith's contributions to the site include some creative writing and some photographs of her mother. She decided to include the photos because she 'wanted to add something personal to the exhibition'. She comments, 'A lot of people on the Net have very personal sites. I find that a really interesting phenomenon.'

Speaking about the variety of works in the World's Women Online project, Sandy explains that it offers an opportunity for women to speak in a way they feel comfortable. 'People have said, 'How do you want us to represent ourselves?', but it's really a question of, 'How do you want to represent yourself to the world?''

Internationally, the project is enormous. Hundreds of exhibitors are now online, and the final tally could be several thousand. The Australian site was opened officially in mid-September by Dr Frances Dyson at the the University's Faculty of Creative Arts, and it will remain active until the end of the year. Internet browsers are welcome to visit at http://www.uow.edu.au/wwwo/ ❑