

Explorer in light

JUNE EDWARDS

IN 2007 THE STATE LIBRARY of South Australia and the University of Melbourne's Baillieu Library prepared a submission to UNESCO to have the archives of Joseph Stanislaus Ostoja-Kotkowski included on the UNESCO *Memory of the World Register* for Australia. They were accepted in February 2008. The citation reads:

Archives of Joseph Stanislaus Ostoja-Kotkowski

State Library of South Australia; Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne

The personal archives of Joseph Stanislaus (Stan) Ostoja-Kotkowski (1922–1994) represent the breadth of work of this prolific and innovative artist-scientist.

Born in Poland, Ostoja-Kotkowski was integral to the development of the arts in Australia, with the introduction, for example, of his innovative work in computer and laser technology, including kinetics and chromasonics, applied to visual art, music and theatre.

He was awarded the Order of Australia in 1992. The archives, housed in both the State Library of South Australia and the Baillieu Library in the University of Melbourne, reveal the entire development process of his outstanding projects in diverse fields such as film-making, photography, murals, theatre and opera, sculpture, sound and image.

The collection is also a rare illustration of the migration and settlement experiences of a post-Second World War displaced person, as very few archives of Polish migrants exist in Australia. (Australian Memory of the World Committee, 2008)

The Ostoja-Kotkowski archives held by the two libraries include:

- files relating to his life and art
- programs, pamphlets, invitations, articles and press clippings in English and Polish relating to the full extent of his career
- photographs, slides, and negatives relating to his theatre designs, sculptures, murals, BP star, art, film, laser shows, chromasonics, electronic images, computer graphics, stained glass and photography
- papers relating to his migration to Australia
- correspondence and photographs relating to his relationship with his family and friends in Poland and with the Polish community in Australia
- films, videos and audio tapes which document his work and various interviews with him about his projects
- original art works
- a theatre set model and models of sculptures
- computer disks
- scrapbooks of photographs and a full documentation of his career to 1983.

As my colleague Rose Wilson, SLSA archivist, commented in 1997, 'archives which end up in the State Library arrive there because they document extraordinary people and events'. In Ostoja's case this is particularly so as he was a driven, hard-working, imaginative and innovative artist. The painter's canvas was not enough for Ostoja's art. Theatre sets, film, photographs, sculpture, murals, vitreous enamels, op collages, computer graphics and ultimately sound and image, chromasonics and laser kinetics all became his 'canvas'.

Ostoja-Kotkowski – known as Stan or Ostoja – was recognised for his talent, receiving: Excellence award AFIAP Berne, Switzerland, for innovative photography (1967); Churchill Fellowship (1969); Creative Arts Fellowship ANU, Canberra (1971); Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts London (1971); Australian American Education Association Fellowship (1973); Polish Order of Cultural Merit (1991); Order of Australia (AM) (1992).

The archives document the impact this significant migrant artist had on the art community in South Australia

and Australia, while maintaining his connection to his Polish origins. The impact of the Australian environment on Ostoja's work is palpable.

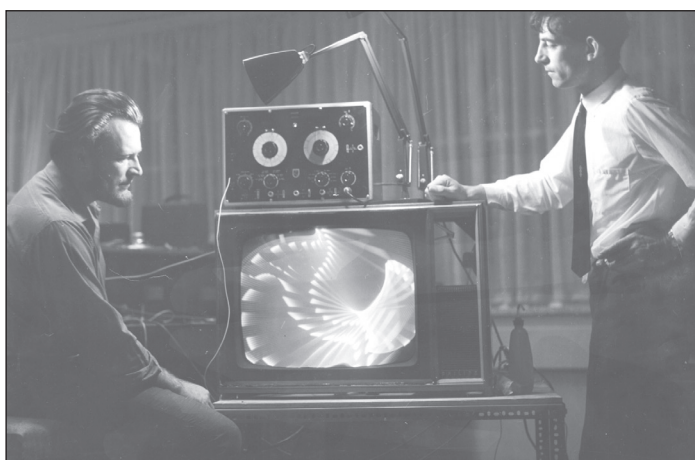
Ostoja was born on 28 December 1922 in Golub, Poland. He settled in Stirling in South Australia in 1955 and died there in 1994. He studied painting and drawing under Oligerd Vetesko in Poland from 1940 to 1945 and won a scholarship to study fine arts at the Dusseldorf Kunst Akademis (Academy of Fine Arts) in Germany between 1946 and 1949. He arrived in Australia in 1949 and lived in Bonegilla migrant camp in Victoria. In 1950 and 1951 Ostoja attended the National Gallery School of Arts in Melbourne and studied under Sir William Dargie and Alan Sumner. He obtained work as a commercial artist designing fabrics, then in 1954–55 worked in central Australia at Leigh Creek as a house painter and labourer at the coalfields. Here he discovered the light and colour of central Australia and this inland experience inspired his artistic direction:

In the centre of Australia I was struck by the iridescence of the colour ... Not only did the colour seem to be vibrating with intensity but at the same time it gave the impression of being something solid ... The surroundings were drowned in an exciting light that had a life of its own. (Ostoja-Kotkowski, 1968)

Capturing this intensity became the focus of his artistic creativity.

Ostoja was a pioneer in the development of experimental arts in Australia. Adrian Rawlins, in *Explorer in light* (1982) says Ostoja-Kotkowski had two basic aims in the pursuit of his art and its presentation to the public. The first was an expression of the essential qualities of light, and the second the freeing of the creative imagination from the impediment of means. Rawlins suggests that Ostoja's sole preoccupation, in fact his overriding obsession, was to explore every possible artistic avenue to realise these two aims.

Ostoja was instrumental in the early years of avant-garde cinema in Australia. In 1956–57 he collaborated with people like Ian Davidson in the production of short experimental films such as *The quest of time*, *Translucencies*, *Architectural exhibition 1956*, *Deserted landscape*, *Hans Heysen*, *Francis Roy Thompson 1956*, *Four movements*, *Transfiguration* and *Seven South Australian artists*. In 1971 he worked on a film called *Albatross*.



With Malcolm Kay, looking at an electronic image created by Ostoja-Kotkowski, c1964. SLSA: PRG 919/4/5
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA



Ostoja-Kotkowski painting at Bonegilla migrant camp, 1949.

SLSA: PRG 919/47/127

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

He brought a modern European approach to filmmaking which was reflected in his collaborations with local filmmakers.

Ostoja made an amazing contribution to the theatre world. His output was prolific and innovative. In the late 1950s and early 1960s he designed the set for the South Australian production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. He began to work with Professor John Bishop at the Elder Conservatorium of the University of Adelaide, designing sets for productions such as *L'elixir d'amour*, *Uncle Vanya* and

The secret marriage, which employed startlingly new, modified light settings and modulations. He designed the set for a new, light/colour abstract presentation for two performances of the South Australian Ballet Theatre. His innovative techniques were then used by the Elder Conservatorium in their Opera Workshops. Among other theatrical events, he staged a visual production on the theme of Orpheus, using dance, music and voice with several projectors. This was the first attempt at quadrasonic sound in Australia, and also the first demonstration of



Dancers surrounded by an electronic image, 1964.

SLSA: PRG 919/4/21

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

'Chromasonics', the science of translating sound into visual images.

Ostoja then designed innovative 'abstracted' scenery for a production of *The marriage of Figaro*, and Benjamin Britten's *The turn of the screw*. *The Bulletin* of 20 October 1962 praised Ostoja's sets for *Cousin from Fiji* in the Union Theatre, Adelaide, and his technique of rear screen projections, which was later adopted throughout Australia. He also designed the sets for the memorable first production of *The ham funeral* in 1961 in Adelaide.

Ostoja considered his 'greatest personal triumph' to be his design for *The excursions of Mr Broucek* for New Opera in association with the 1974 Adelaide Festival of Arts. This was the first opera performance in the world to use laser effects, and the first time a production had been designed especially for the newly opened Festival Theatre.

His work in theatre continued throughout his life, including productions for the Polish Theatre Company. For Ostoja:

set design was a passion providing an opportunity to develop and to practically apply the combination of visual and aural media in which he was recognised, at least within the Australian context, as an expert. With his interest in combining colour with movement, sound with image, light with narrative, Ostoja was able to express the many facets of his talent in one encompassing art form, that of theatre.

Moving from what he perceived as the restrictions and limitations of the canvas, as a means of expression, theatre allowed Ostoja a scale of presentation in keeping with his soaring and ever changing imagination. (Macdonald 2003)

Ostoja was a pioneer in the production of electronic paintings. His first electronic image idea occurred in 1960, and in 1964 the first electronic designing unit was built at the Philips Research Laboratories, Hendon SA. Images produced there were exhibited at the Argus Gallery in Melbourne in June 1964. Ostoja was recognised for his production of the electronic paintings with an FIAP Award (1967), awarded in Berne, for excellence in innovative photography. With this, and articles in journals in Europe, he received international recognition for his innovation.

At the 1964 Adelaide Festival of Arts Ostoja-Kotkowski was the originator of the audio-visual experimental theatre *Sound and image* which was produced in conjunction with John Dallwitz and Elizabeth Dalman and performed at Prince Alfred College. It was the largest light mosaic ever staged at the time. An electronic images sequence produced with a ballet was shown on GTV-9 in September 1964 and Ostoja used still projected electronic images in his *Sound and image* production in the 1966 Adelaide Arts Festival.

In 1967, whilst on his Churchill Fellowship, he visited Stanford University in California and observed experiments with lasers. He realised they were a tool to fulfil his realisation of operating with light. Ostoja found that 'the blue green is so brilliant that an aquamarine stone reflecting in the sunlight appears dull in comparison' (Rawlins, 1982). At the time, the Salisbury Defence Research Centre was the only place in Australia that worked on laser technology. The staff at the Salisbury centre gave Ostoja time in their laboratory which was invaluable for the development of his work. At the Adelaide Festival of Arts in 1968 his *Sound and image* experimental theatre production used a laser beam for the first time.

In 1969 Ostoja-Kotkowski presented an audio-visual concert of Krzysztof Penderecki's *The passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ according to St Luke* at the Bonython Hall, University of Adelaide. At the 1970 Adelaide Festival of Arts he was the director of design and created a chromasonic tower 120 feet tall with 400 globes which were activated by the frequency of sound. The music was relayed through loudspeakers surrounding the tower. At the Festival he presented an Australian Aboriginal dreamtime theme *Time riders* in his *Sound and image* theatre, working with contemporary figures in poetry, music and dance. This was the first production of its kind in Australia and combined dreamtime legends with the poetry of Judith Wright, Roland Robinson, Kenneth Slessor and Max Harris. The script was by Tony Morphett and the music by Richard Meale, Peter Sculthorpe and John Antill.

In 1971 Ostoja was awarded a Creative Arts Fellowship at the ANU in Canberra. Working with the Department of Physics, he designed and built the first laser-chromason, which automatically reacted in colours, shapes and kinetics to sound and music. While in Canberra he produced *Synchronos '72*. The music was by Don Banks, Larry Sitsky, Donald Hollier and John Crocker with a laser light show. The players' music was translated into visual kinetic images on a screen above the orchestra.

The period of Ostoja-Kotkowski's Creative Arts Fellowship at the Australian National University (ANU) overlapped with that of Australian composer Don Banks who was also Director of Music at the University of London's Goldsmiths' College. This was to be of advantage to both artists as it allowed them to collaborate on an unconventional project, which was to attract both adverse and complimentary publicity.

With the assistance of the scientists and electronics technicians employed at the ANU, and it was with their ingenuity and patience, he was able to produce a system of laser beam projection which he, in characteristic terms, labelled the Laser-Chromason System. This imaginative system allowed the sounds (composed music) to trigger movement in the projected laser beams creating patterns dependent on pitch and amplitude. With this combination the beam was seen to react to the pitch and rhythm of the music that was fed into the system. This was projected onto a screen above the heads and equipment of the musicians who were playing live on the stage. Laser beams were to play an important part in the artistic output of Ostoja-Kotkowski. (Macdonald, 2003)

In 1975 the Laser-Chromasonics and Chromasonic Tower Mark II were exhibited at the Festival of Creative Arts and Sciences in Canberra entitled *Australia '75*. At the Royal Adelaide International Exposition '78 the



The chromasonic tower translated music and sounds surrounding it into lights at night. Adelaide, 1970.

SLSA: PRG 919/30/1410

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Chromasonic Tower Mark II was built. It consisted of a 24-foot tower which was illuminated by 120 lights colour-coded to respond to sound. Two screens each 6.1 metres x 6.1 metres showed kinetic laser images synchronised or activated by sound. At the 1980 Adelaide Festival of Arts a laser kinetics exhibition was held in conjunction with a holographic exhibit from the New York Museum. Over 45,000 visitors saw *Futuresight*, the first exhibition of holography and laser kinetics on such a large scale in Australia.

In 1981 Telecom Australia commissioned Ostoja to make a laser kinetic mural which was exhibited at the Royal Adelaide Show. The exhibit received a prize for the most outstanding government/semi-government display at the show. During the 1980s various laser exhibitions were held at the Ballarat Begonia Festival (1984), the SA Jubilee Celebrations (1986) and at the Science Discovery Centre in Adelaide.

In September 1991 Ostoja participated in the great exhibition of emigrant artists entitled *We are present*. At the invitation of the National Philharmonic in Warsaw Ostoja staged a laser kinetic concert – *Synkronos 91*. Fifteen lasers were found in Poland and Ostoja took 200 kilograms of equipment from Australia. The displays were mounted with recordings from Bach to the Australian band Gondwanaland. Planned to be shown three times, the demand was such that there were eight performances.

Until 1975 Ostoja had to invent the technology required for his creative vision; thus he contributed to science in art as an inventor. His pioneering work as an artist–scientist was unique at the time in Australia and was in the vanguard of similar work in America and Europe. Before most people had heard of multimedia environments or lightshows his versatility led him to experiment with technology to produce unique artistic performances. To quote Ostoja:

I am not seeking to smear art with science as some of my critics claim, but I am trying to free the imagination from the impediments of means. Electronic methods of making images can lead to a more immediate articulation of ideas and to an art which is taking place within today's environment. (Horton, 1975, p. 45)

Alongside this prolific output Ostoja also created a range of work in other media. A few examples include: an annual Christmas star in Melbourne on BP House; murals for BP House and Nauru House in Melbourne, which used an uncommon electroplating technique; and significant sculptures such as *Helios* at Churchill House in Canberra, *Sphaeros* at the Perth District Court, a memorial to the Katyn massacre in Angas Street Adelaide, and the monument to Tadeusz Kosciuszko at Cooma New South Wales. Australia Post commissioned a postage stamp; various Adelaide Arts Festivals included art exhibitions, a float and street decorations; the Adelaide Airport commissioned an op collage which is now housed at Flinders University; churches commissioned sculptures and altars; the Universities of Adelaide and Melbourne commissioned stained glass windows, a jade window, and a theremin mural; and various art galleries such as the Barry Stern Gallery, the Argus Gallery and Lidums Gallery held solo art shows of paintings, op collages, vitreous enamels, electronic and laser images. He entered the decorated fridges competition organised by the *Australian Women's Weekly* for Legacy, with artists such as Arthur Boyd and Clifton Pugh. He won the Cornell Prize twice for his paintings. Ostoja transformed the facade of an eleven-storey glass building in Victoria Square Adelaide into a gigantic, colourful mosaic by covering the windows with translucent filters. At the time it was the largest light mosaic ever staged anywhere. In the late 1980s Ostoja became interested in chaos theory and Mandelbrot's beauty of fractals. He used Mandelbrot's mathematical formulae as a pallet of colours and shapes to create computer graphics, of which he created hundreds from 1989 onwards.¹

1. Ostoja's works are represented in many countries and institutions including: Adelaide University, South Australia; Art Gallery of New South Wales; Art Gallery of South Australia; Art Gallery of Western Australia; Australian National Gallery, Canberra; Australian National University, Canberra Commonwealth Collection, Canberra; Flinders University Art Museum, South Australia; McClelland Gallery, Victoria; Mertz Collection (since sold); Monash University Museum of Art; National Gallery of Victoria; Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery; Queensland Art Gallery; Sears Roebuck of America; Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery; The Performing Arts Collection of South Australia; University of Melbourne; Historical Museum of Przasnysz, Poland; Peter Stuyvesant Trust, USA; Society of Fine Arts, Krakow, Poland; Private collections of Greenberg, USA, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, USSR, Sir Herbert Read, UK.

Ostoja-Kotkowski's drive and constant search for innovation produced work which provided a spirituality, born in Eastern Europe and moulded by the Australian landscape and light. He contributed to the Polish community in Australia by producing artistic works which reflected Polish culture and history. He contributed to the South Australian community by bringing an energy, vitality and dynamism which produced works for local arts festivals, businesses, individuals and community groups. He contributed to the broader artistic scene by his visits overseas and his exhibitions and productions which were held in Poland, America and Europe. He was a catalyst for a more adventurous style of theatre in Australia and he brought a modern European approach to filmmaking. His op art introduced many Australians to this genre. In Przasnysz, Poland, where Ostoja grew up, the Town Cultural Centre and one of the streets bear his

name and there is a Stanislaw Ostoja-Kotkowski memorial medal (*Stanislaw Ostoja-Kotkowski, 2004*).

During his life many articles were written about Ostoja and his work, in both English and Polish; radio interviews were plentiful and some television segments were made. His work created a large audience, from a broad spectrum of society, which was excited by his artistic creations. Reviews of his films, theatre sets and kinetic productions were not always positive, mainly because Ostoja was always pushing audiences to the edge, which sometimes made them uncomfortable. He was accused of commercialism, as he appealed to a broader audience than the art gallery clientele. He was an artist who managed to live from his art, but it was his art that was important to him.

However, the vast majority of reviews and articles written about him by Adrian Rawlins and others were in awe of his work. He had many supporters such as Derek Jolley, Clem Christensen, John Dallwitz and Kym Bonython. Many young artists found his work inspirational and many worked with him on his productions, murals and op collages. One of the troubles with his legacy is that much of his artistic output was not on 'canvas'. His paintings, vitreous enamels, sculptures, murals, etc. are there for posterity in galleries, buildings, and private collections. However it is only in his archives that films and videos of his laser productions and theatre sets exist.

He was a pioneer within the Australian context in most areas of the visual and performing arts in which he was involved. He was an eclectic artist who excelled in painting, and was especially recognised for his contribution



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Sculpture to the Victims of Katyn in WWII outside the Dom Polski Centre, Adelaide. SLSA: PRG 919/28/197

to Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, photography, film, theatre and opera set design, sculpture, mural design, electronic painting, and the use of laser beams within the arts. He should be recognised as an artist of considerable stature and of continuing influence within the world of art. The ephemeral nature of much of his experimental output, however, has meant that there are few actual records of the performances beyond the memories of those audience members who were present (and often awestruck by the brilliance) and the critical reports of the performances contained in the print media of the time. His legacy is perhaps the knowledge that others, who were observers of his work, still derive inspiration from it.

Ostoja was above all an artist with an ability to see beyond the walls of convention and into the future. He indeed fulfilled his often-expressed desire to free the imagination from the impediments of traditional media. He was able to harness the knowledge of others when his inspiration was not matched by his technological knowledge, and by doing so, extended the freedom of the artists who were to follow, who found themselves no longer bound by convention and form. He was indeed *the man with light in his eyes* (Macdonald, 2003).



June Edwards recently retired from the State Library of South Australia

where for seven years she worked as an Archival Field Officer involved with oral history and archives.

She was an archivist for many years with the National Archives of Australia, the Noel Butlin Archives Centre at the ANU, James Cook University Archives and State Records of South Australia. She is on the branch committees of the Oral History Association of Australia and the Australian Society of Archivists.

Bibliography

- | | |
|---|--|
| Australian Memory of the World Committee 2008, <i>Australian Memory of the World Register</i> , viewed 16 July 2009, < http://www.amw.org.au/items/028(Ostoja-Kotkowski%20archive)/citation028.htm >. | Ostoja-Kotkowski, SJ 1968, 'Kinetics and electronics in art'. Power Institute lecture. Personal papers of JS Ostoja-Kotkowski, PRG 919, p.1. |
| Horton, Mervyn 1975, <i>Australian painters of the 70's</i> , Ure Smith, Dee Why, NSW. | Rawlins, Adrian 1982, 'Explorer in light', <i>Art and Australia</i> , vol. 19, no 3. |
| Macdonald, Ian 2003, <i>Josef Stanislaw Ostoja-Kotkowski: Explorer in sound and light</i> , viewed 16 July 2009, < http://www.crookedmirror.com/soundandlight/ >. | Stanislaw Ostoja-Kotkowski 2004, viewed 16 July 2009, < http://ostoja.kotkowski.w.interia.pl/eng.htm >. |