

## **Recovering History - Critical and Archival Histories of the Computer-based Arts**

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During the 1960's artists first began to get involved with digital computing. By 1968 it was possible for Jasia Reichardt to curate a survey of work in the area in the influential Cybernetic Serendipity exhibition held at London's Institute of Contemporary Art - the ICA. The show went on to tour the United States and Japan and many young artists were inspired to get involved with computers after seeing it.

The concept of user-friendly applications was still way in the future and using a computer meant for most artists learning how to program. It wasn't easy and only appealed to certain minds. The resulting work owed much to the traditions of Constructivism and the then popular Systems Art. A new generation of artists emerged who took the computational and generative systems as their primary working methodology.

However times were changing. Late modernism was replaced by what has become known as post-modernism which relatively quickly became the dominant critical and curatorial aesthetic. The computer-based work was problematic - it challenged the understanding of the humanities-trained theorists (who wouldn't at that point in time have had any exposure whatsoever to computer systems). In consequence the computational work was wrongly identified with technological absolutism and the modernistic emphasis on intrinsic media qualities.

In consequence many young artists emerging from the new interdisciplinary programs were not able to participate in the mainstream artworld. Their work wasn't exhibited in the prestigious and influential state and private galleries or discussed in the art media.

Their prospect wasn't completely bleak. In 1968, after meetings at IFIP in Edinburgh, the Computer Arts Society - CAS - was formed at Event One at the Royal College of Art. In addition to publishing over 50 issues of their bulletin - PAGE - CAS also curated several exhibitions - often held in the unsold shell spaces at major computer trade shows and conferences.

This tradition was "formalised" over a decade later when in 1981 the ACM's Special Interest Group in Graphics - SIGGRAPH - augmented their annual conference with an art show co-curated by Darcy Gerbarg and Ray Lauzzana. The annual SIGGRAPH Art Show became a major international venue throughout the 1980's and continues to this day [13].

Lauzzana went on to found fineArt forum - fAf - in 1987 as an online bulletin board dedicated to the electronic arts [9]. Now under the editorship of

Australian hypermedia writer Linda Carroli it still appears monthly as both an email digest and a web 'zine. A complete 15-year archive is available on CD.

Another essential resource was founded back in 1968 by the American artist/engineer Frank Malina. The journal Leonardo remains the principal scholarly publication addressing the convergence of arts, science and technology. With a move to MIT Press in the early 1990's it was able to launch it's own book imprint and online publication - Leonardo Electronic Almanac or LEA [11].

In 1979 in Austria the Linz-based Ars Electronica annual festival began [12] and then in 1988 the Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts - ISEA was formed in the Netherlands [10].

These and other resources and opportunities enabled the digital arts and their makers to survive and flourish albeit in a marginalised and often maligned form. We became an international "salon des refuses"!

Now postmodernism itself is on the wane and many of the pioneers who were involved in the digital and electronic arts have sadly died. There's a growing awareness that if this period isn't documented and archived soon it runs the risk of being permanently forgotten. A huge chunk of art history will have been lost forever. A number of international initiatives have sprung up to ensure that this doesn't happen.

I am associated with CACHe - Computer Arts, Contexts, Histories, etc... [1]. Funded by the British Arts and Humanities Board (AHRB) the CACHe project is based in the Dept. of History of Art, Film and Visual Media at Birkbeck College, University of London. It's a three-year program that aims to archive, document and create both historical and critical contexts for the computer arts in the UK from their origins to around 1980 when the "user-friendly" systems began to appear. The word arts is used in its plural sense and we intend to include the visual and performing arts, literature, etc...

Stephen Jones project is called: "Synthetics: Towards a History of Computer Art in Australia" [2]. It covers the development and use of the electronically generated image in Australia from its first appearance in computing to its subsequent use in video, film and media art. Jones intention is to uncover the interactions and streams of influence between people working in hardware and software technological developments and artists working in the many areas of image production that were enabled by these technologies.

The Paris-based Leonardo/Olats : Pionniers & Précurseurs (Pioneers & Pathbreakers) project is managed by Annick Bureaud [3]. It aims to establish reliable, selected, on line documentation about the artists of the 20th Century whose works and thoughts have been seminal for techno-science related art. The project is being carried out through a collaborative working group of art historians, scholars and researchers. So far, the project has been mainly done in French although translations into English are under consideration.

Sue Gollifer of the University of Brighton is undertaking a project to create a Digital Archive of ISEA [4]. It's another project being supported by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Board. The aim of the project it to catalogue and preserve an educational electronic archive of the International

Symposium of Electronic Art - Conference and Exhibition 1988 - 2002. These will include the conference proceedings, catalogues and CD-ROM's and work from the accompanying exhibitions and performances.

In Germany the computer arts pioneer Frieder Nake is creating "compArt - a structured space for computer art" [5]. He describes it as a ... "a hypermedium on the history of computer art." They are currently focussing on the early history from 1965 to 1980 but plan to include later periods. At present it's in German but translations are planned.

Also in Germany the historian and theorist Oliver Grau, author of "VIRTUAL ART - From Illusion to Immersion" has put a critical database online on his website [6].

The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology operates a Centre for Research and Documentation (CR+D). It aims to document history, artworks and practices associated with electronic, digital media arts and make this information available to researchers in an innovative manner [7].

The Digital Art Museum - DAM - is another project that has received funding from the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Board [8]. As the name implies it's a virtual museum of pioneers and practitioners. It's also an interesting collaboration between an academic institution, Metropolitan University and the gallerist Wolfgang Lieser. Lieser comments that all this academic and philanthropic research will establish a new legitimacy for the computer-based arts. In response the work will become collectable, there will be an increase in demand and improved sales. Now that's something most practitioners will be pleased to hear about!

### **Further sources of information**

#### **[1] CACHE - Computer Arts, Contexts, Histories, etc...**

<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/hafvm/cache/>

Contact: Nick Lambert [info@cache.bbk.ac.uk](mailto:info@cache.bbk.ac.uk)

#### **[2] Synthetics: Towards a History of Computer Art in Australia**

Jones, Stephen, "Synthetics: The Electronically Generated Image in Australia" *Leonardo*, vol.36, no.2 (April 2003).

Jones, Stephen, "The Evolution of Computer Art in Australia" *Computer Art Journal*, vol.1, 2003, Europa Editions, France.

Contact: Stephen Jones [sjones@culture.com.au](mailto:sjones@culture.com.au)

#### **[3] The Leonardo/Olats: Pionniers & Précurseurs (Pioneers & Pathbreakers)**

<http://www.olats.org/setF4.html>

Contact: Annick Bureau [annickb@altern.org](mailto:annickb@altern.org)

**[4] ISEA Digital Archive Project**

<http://www.isea-web.org/eng/projects.html>

Contact: Sue Gollifer [s.c.gollifer@bton.ac.uk](mailto:s.c.gollifer@bton.ac.uk)

**[5] compArt - a structured space for computer art**

<http://www.agis.informatik.uni-bremen.de>

Contact: Frieder Nake [nake@informatik.uni-bremen.de](mailto:nake@informatik.uni-bremen.de)

**[6] VIRTUAL ART - From Illusion to Immersion**

Oliver Grau, The M.I.T. Press, January 2003, ISBN 0-262-07241-6, 7 x 9,

<http://www.arthist.hu-berlin.de/arthistd/mitarbli/og/og.htm>

go to DATABASE - English version

Contact; Oliver Grau [Oliver.Grau@culture.hu-berlin.de](mailto:Oliver.Grau@culture.hu-berlin.de)

**[7] The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology  
Centre for Research and Documentation (CR+D)**

<http://www.fondation-langlois.org/e/CRD/index.html>

Contact: [info@fondation-langlois.org](mailto:info@fondation-langlois.org)

**[8] The Digital Art Museum - DAM**

<http://www.dam.org/>

Contact: Wolfgang Lieser [Digitalartmuseum@aol.com](mailto:Digitalartmuseum@aol.com)

**[9] fineArt forum - the art and technology netnews**

<http://www.fineartforum.org>

Contact: Linda Carroli [editor@finartforum.org](mailto:editor@finartforum.org)

**[10] ISEA - the Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts**

<http://www.isea-web.org>

Contact: [info@isea-web.org](mailto:info@isea-web.org)

**[11] Leonardo Electronic Almanac**

<http://mitpress2.mit.edu/e-journals/LEA/>

Contact: Nisar Keshvani [lea@mitpress.mit.edu](mailto:lea@mitpress.mit.edu)

**[12] Ars Electronica**

<http://www.aec.at/>

Contact: [info@aec.at](mailto:info@aec.at)

[13] Prince, Patric: **A Brief History of SIGGRAPH Art Exhibitions: Brave New Worlds**, *Leonardo*, Supplemental Issue, **Computer Art in Context** for ACM SIGGRAPH '89 Art Show, 1989