

The art of Understanding

Or, a primer on why we study history

Patric Prince, juror

Why did a substantial number of submissions to this SIGGRAPH Art Gallery demonstrate a lack of knowledge of the history of digital art? There is an art to understanding creative invention that involves information as well as experience and personal preference.

In the early decades of digital art, artists had somewhat limited modes of expression because of an incomplete understanding of what computer techniques and applications would do for them. Now it seems some artistic production shows a considerable lack of knowledge of what has gone before.

Previously, one could distinguish between not only what program a particular work was made with and on which type of machine, but also who created that particular effort, because of the signature of the machine and of the available commercial instructions. This led to a preference for work made with original programming techniques because the work can appear to be more innovative. Program or perish became the call of the digital avant garde in the 80s, similar to the intellectual battles fought in the 19th century between artists who were Colorists versus the Classicists, (Ingres vs. Delacroix). Artists, who do not have an interest in programming, select other significant paths to fulfillment.

An important aspect of this discussion is that to be able to contribute to the genre of digital art, we must remember its algorithmic foundations. Artists who treat the computer as “just another tool” can miss the most innovative features of the experience. The search for visual intelligence is a critical aspect of this genre. It is the quality of art ideas and of the realization of them that makes digital art of interest to us in our age. [1] Those practitioners of digital production who are only concerned in the techniques in and of themselves are not necessarily creating art. The dispute about the making of “pretty pictures” as art is old and tired in the Western tradition. The making of pretty pictures does not need nor relate to computer applications and techniques. The singular advantage that is brought to this ubiquitous form by computer processes is ease of use. It is easy to make any picture using modern digital equipment; it is not easy to make good art. The substitution of technique for content or intent is a banal exercise. A significant use of the computer allied to a good art idea, the content, is a demanding task.

The medium selected for the expression of art ideas ought to realize and be appropriate to the specific work of art. The choice of medium is a fundamental part of the work and should not depend upon ease of production. There are still those who believe that Integrity in an artwork demands that if it looks like a watercolor it probably should be a watercolor unless there are compelling reasons otherwise. There will always be exceptions to this and every other canon; art, like life, is always changing. Expression is embedded in the human condition so completely that everyone believes that he or she is

an art expert. Art is knowledge-based like any other discipline. “I don’t know anything about math but I know what I formulae I like”.

In knowing what went before, an artist can express ideas in a singular voice. If an art idea has been explored in the past, should it be copied (plagiarized) or reinterpreted? Pioneer computer artist, Paul Brown has hypothesized that it takes at least fifty years of practice before interesting, valid mediums are produced with any new technique.[2] Early computer artists (those working in the 1960s -1970s) used interactivity, randomness, algorithmic expression, dimensionality, transformations, motion, heuristic techniques and other inventive aspects of digital production in their work.[3] These features of digital expression were used to convey art ideas that were part of their time. Here we are 40+ years on in the development of this art and artists are not only copying what went before, but also the exact style signature of well-known artists. Future works will involve processes, forms and art ideas still in embryonic stages. By understanding the past artists and participant viewers can evolve and extend expression.

How significant is the knowledge of the history of digital art, to the artist? Is it being addressed at the University level? Should artists repeat the past or not repeat the past? Is “the new” in creative expression always better or as some believe worse? What forms are appropriate for artwork in the twenty-first century? Need I state the obvious; the profession demands knowledge as well as accomplishment in artistic production.

Stay tuned for the future; if we don’t find it, it will find us.

[1] Frank Dietrich, “Visual Intelligence; The First Decade of Computer Art (1965-75),” Leonardo, 19, no.2 (1986): 159-169.

[2] Paul Brown, Personal communication to the author, August, 2002.
see a discussion of this in <http://www.paulbrown.com/WORDS/EMCULT.HTM>
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Experimenta Media Arts, Games Theory, issue 12 MESH.

[3] Patric Prince, ACM/SIGGRAPH 86 Art Show Catalog, “Computer Aesthetics,” (1986): 41.