

Lea

LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC

VOL 17 NO 1 A collection of articles, reviews and opinion pieces that discuss and analyze the complexity of mixing things together as a process that is not necessarily undertaken in an orderly and organized manner. Wide open opportunity to discuss issues in interdisciplinary education; art, science and technology interactions; personal artistic practices; history of re-combinatory practices; hybridizations between old and new media; cultural creolization; curatorial studies and more.

Contributions from

Frieder Nake, Stelarc, Paul Catanese

and other important cultural operators.

M I S H
W V 2 H

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THE CONTEMPORARY BECOMES DIGITAL

by

Bruce Wands

Artist, Musician, Writer, Curator

Chair, MFA Computer Art, School of Visual Arts

Director, New York Digital Salon

In 2003, I wrote an essay that was published in the SIGGRAPH Art Gallery catalog titled “The Digital Becomes Contemporary.” A lot has happened in the digital art field in the past eight years, and this essay will examine some of those changes as they relate to the relationship between digital and contemporary art. A complete version of the original article can be found below.

So, where do we stand in 2011? The first few sentences from 2003 state that, “We are at a special and paradoxical moment in the development of digital art. Now that it is finally gaining widespread public and critical attention, digital art is also being quickly absorbed into the world of contemporary art. The next generation of artists and critics will not look at making art with a computer as something extraordinary or unusual. This phenomenon is already quite apparent in galleries in New York and abroad.” In terms of being at a special and paradoxical moment, that is still the case. As technology evolves, so does digital art. New forms of digital art are gaining widespread popularity, such as digital sculpture and interactive art. One excellent example of the evolution of digital sculpture

is the *Digital Stone Exhibition*, which toured China in 2008 and 2009. The exhibition featured four artists, Bruce Beasley, Jon Isherwood, Robert Michael Smith and Kenneth Snelson. The concept of the project was to merge digital sculpture technologies with traditional Chinese stone carving. As such, it became a cross-cultural event and expanded the global reach of digital art. Another interesting facet to this project is that it combined rapid prototyping, which is decades old, with Chinese stone carving, which is thousands of years old. The exhibition traveled to four venues in China including the Today Art Museum in Beijing, Duolun Museum of Fine Art in Shanghai, Artmap Gallery in Wenzhou and the Jinese Gallery in Chongqing. In addition to the large hand-carved stone sculptures, there was an additional component called “e-Form.” Curated by the four primary artists, the work of thirty international artists was showcased. The creative work included digital artifacts, rapid prototypes and many other examples of digital sculpture.

The acceptance of archival digital prints has been a relatively smooth process, and the skepticism that was originally directed at digital prints because of their

lack of archival quality is disappearing. One tragedy is that much of the early work that was not archival has disappeared or deteriorated. One major landmark in this evolution is the Computer Art & Technocultures Project, which was a partnership between Birbeck College and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. It was funded by a three-year grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The team consisted of Nick Lambert, Jeremy Gardiner and Francesca Franco at Birbeck College and Douglas Dodds and Honor Beddard at the v&a. The project had many components, and was inspired by the acquisition of the Patric Prince archive by the Victoria & Albert Museum. Patric Prince is an art historian and collector of digital art. She documented and followed the evolution of the art form, and curated a retrospective exhibition for the SIGGRAPH Art Gallery in 1986. Her archive consists of over 200 original artworks and a large collection of books, catalogs and memorabilia that document the history of digital art. The goal of the project was to trace the development of computer-based art from the late 1970s to the 1990s and took place from 2007 through 2010. Some of the outcomes of the project included academic presentations at several conferences, panel discussions and a conference and exhibition. One panel was done in conjunction with the New York Digital Salon titled “Technocultures: The History of Digital Art – A Conversation” and included digital art pioneers Kenneth Knowlton, Margot Lovejoy, Kenneth Snelson and Lillian Schwartz. In July of 2009, *Digital Pioneers*, by Honor Beddard and Douglas Dodds was published and accompanied the *Digital Pioneers* exhibition at the v&a, which was held from December 2009 – April 2010, and included works by Frieder Nake, Georg Nees, Roman Verostko, and British artists Paul Brown and Harold Cohen, among others. The project concluded with two symposia, “Decoding the Digital” held at the v&a and “Ideas Before Their Time – Connecting the Past and Present in Computer Art” at the British Computer Society.

Bringing us up to the present moment, “Drawing with Code” will open at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, MA in February of 2011. Curated by George Fiefield, the exhibition will feature works from the collection of Michael and Anne Spalter. Included in the exhibition will be an image by Ben Laposky, one

of the first digital art pioneers, along with 40 works of 21 pioneering artists, including Jean-Pierre Hébert, Manfred Mohr, Vera Molnar, Mark Wilson, Stan Van-DerBeek, Roman Verostko, and Edward Zajec.

The three examples above demonstrate that digital art is finally getting noticed and celebrated by the contemporary art community. However, it still receives major support from the digital art community, as opposed to the contemporary art world. The gratifying aspect of this is that the digital art pioneers are finally having their day in the sun and being recognized, collected and exhibited. The vast majority of younger digital artists are not being “ghettoized”, for lack of a better word, as the pioneers were. Rather than exploring uncharted territory, emerging artists are drawing upon the work created by the pioneers and making contemporary art. One of my concerns as a writer, curator and art historian, is that we fill in the huge gap in the lineage of digital art, as well as celebrate younger artists exploring creativity across all media. Roger Malina uses the term “new Leonardos” and I fully agree. We are beginning a new renaissance, but this time it is a global one that uses technology to connect individuals on various levels.

To conclude, I would like to refer to one other quote from the below article. “While the line between digital art and contemporary art is blurring, digital technology has fundamentally changed not only the way art will be created in the future, but also the way it will be perceived, exhibited and distributed. Technology has caused a blending of art and culture worldwide. In the past, schools of art were established by small groups of artists in specific geographic locations. The Internet and widespread availability of digital tools have allowed international artists to create and share their work and ideas about digital art.” There is no question that digital art and contemporary art are merging. One important aspect is the evolution of the art experience from the museum and gallery into our daily lives. Mobile technology is one of the “next waves” of social interaction and the expression of personal identity. In the case of the artist, it is their creative persona that is now available globally. The question that we need to ask is how the contemporary art establishment will embrace these technological changes, as well as change along with it. While it is vitally important

for creative expression to evolve, we must avoid the pitfalls of commercialism in art and look at creativity as existing beyond the creation of objects and moving into the evolution of an aesthetic experience, whether it be in a museum, gallery or on a mobile device. ■

Digital Stone Exhibition and related links

<http://digital-stone.net/>

“Digital Sculpture: Ars Ex Machina” by William V. Ganis

http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmago4/septo4/rapidproto/septo4_rapidproto.shtml

“La sculpture numerique” by Christian Lavigne

<http://www.sculpture.org/documents/webspec/magazine/wsenglis.shtml>

“Fluid Borders: The Aesthetic Evolution of Digital Sculpture”

by Christiane Paul

<http://www.sculpture.org/documents/webspec/digscul/digscul.shtml>

Computer Art & Technocultures

<http://www.technocultures.org.uk/>

<http://www.technocultures.org.uk/symposium.html>

<http://www.nydigitalsalon.org/webcasts.php>

Drawing with Code

<http://www.decordova.org/art/exhibitions/current/drawing-withcode.html>

THE DIGITAL BECOMES CONTEMPORARY

Bruce Wands

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Director, New York Digital Salon

First published in the SIGGRAPH 2003 Art Gallery Catalog - copyright 2003 Bruce Wands

We are at a special and paradoxical moment in the development of digital art. Now that it is finally gaining widespread public and critical attention, digital art is also being quickly absorbed into the world of contemporary art. The next generation of artists and critics will not look at making art with a computer as something extraordinary or unusual. This phenomenon is already quite apparent in galleries in New York and abroad. While galleries like Postmasters and Bitforms specialize in new media art, numerous other galleries in Chelsea exhibit similar work, but do not make the distinction that it is new media art. Another growing trend in New York is for artists to display prints along with new media as an integral part of the exhibition. The return to the object is due in part to the recent widespread availability of archival printing methods. Museums are also in the process of refitting to accommodate the next wave of contemporary art. The Museum of Modern Art in New York has closed for two years to update its galleries and the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art in Amsterdam is planning a major renovation for 2004. For those of us who have followed the SIGGRAPH Art Show for many years, this acceptance of digital art by the contemporary art world is refreshing, but also raises many questions. Digital art has operated outside the art establishment for many years and this has allowed it to remain relatively free.

Digital art originated as a product of the creative experiments of artists and engineers in the early days of computing. The use of the ASCII character set to make

digital prints was one of the first methods used. Ken Knowlton and Leon Harman were two early computer art pioneers at Bell Labs. In 1966, Billy Kluver, along with Robert Rauschenberg, organized a series of events in New York City called *Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT)* in which artists used technology in their creative practice. Exhibitions in the late 1960's like *Cybernetic Serendipity* at the ICA in London and *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York held promise for those pioneers who saw the creative potential of computers. In the early days, mainframe computers were only accessible to engineers and it was difficult for artists to get access to these machines. During this time, computer art was experiencing the same fate that photography and video art suffered when they first began to develop. There were considerable technical problems, not only from the hardware point of view, but the software did not have the sophistication it has today. The archiving of the digital art was also difficult. The continual changes in operating systems and software upgrades made preserving digital files difficult. The real revolution in digital art came in the 1980's with the development of the IBM PC and Macintosh computers. The development of machines that artists could afford and the creation of paint systems with full color capabilities brought new life to digital art. Artists like Barbara Nessim used output from a Macintosh LaserWriter as the foundation for her paintings. Photography was also used as a method for making digital prints. Photos were initially taken directly off the screen and film recorders were later developed to get high resolution photographic images out of the computer. Digital printing methods were still being developed and archival printing methods have only recently become widespread.

The early 1990's saw the development of interactive multimedia and the tremendous widespread public acceptance of the Internet. This caused the art community, as well as the general public, to focus on net art and interactive installations. As a reaction to the all electronic SIGGRAPH Art Show in 1993, the New York Professional Chapter of ACM SIGGRAPH held the first New York Digital Salon at the Art Directors Club. This was an exhibition of approximately 50 prints. The exhibition was one of the first digital art exhibitions in New York since the 1960's and was favorably received.

The New York Digital Salon has since evolved into a venue for international artists that includes all forms of artistic expression created with computers and technology, including prints, installations, sculpture, disk-based media, animation, digital video, Web sites, performances, and music.

The last five years have seen a literal explosion in the presence of digital art in galleries and museums. In 2001, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art exhibited *010101: Art in Technological Times* and the Whitney Museum of American Art opened *BitStreams and Data Dynamics*. The Brooklyn Museum of Art *Digital Printmaking* exhibition in 2001 traced the history of printmaking, ending with a focus on digital printmaking methods. While the line between digital art and contemporary art is blurring, digital technology has fundamentally changed not only the way art will be created in the future, but also the way it will be perceived, exhibited and distributed. Technology has caused a blending of art and culture world-wide. In the past, schools of art were established by small groups of artists in specific geographic locations. The Internet and widespread availability of digital tools have allowed international artists to create and share their work and ideas about digital art.

The 2003 SIGGRAPH Art Show is returning to its roots with an emphasis on digital prints, sculpture and the growing impact of digital video and animation. This point of view confirms that we are stepping back from focusing on the tools and looking through them into the art. While there are still many new technical frontiers to explore with digital art practice, we are still only at the beginning of creating an entirely new form of contemporary art. We must remember that its power is based on the art that preceded it, not the technology. This year's SIGGRAPH Art Show pays tribute to that history and the future of contemporary art. ■

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photograph Murat Germen,
Muta-morphosis #79, Istanbul,
150 x 85 cm, 2011, 7 editions + 2 AP,
courtesy of C.A.M. gallery.

