Beyond Computer Art

Brian Reffin Smith

Let us first agree that most 'computer art' is old-fashioned, boring, meretricious nonsense; and then that most of it is done by people whose knowledge of contemporary art and its problems is more or less zero; and then that most of this 'art' is actually a demonstration of the power of a few companies' graphics systems; then that most of the 'art' is really graphic design, produced for graphic design-like (and thus not art-like) reasons; and finally that there is a sort of 'mafia' of people who produce, teach, write about, judge at competitions and generally celebrate and curate this 'art' (the present author not excluded).

Let us then not be surprised that most 'proper' art galleries will not show it; that most critics will not even notice it, or if they do tear it to shreds; that even when it *is* shown or written about, it comes in scare-quotes; that it is almost always talked about in a sort of 'whatever-will-they-get-up-to-next' tone of voice; that most of the sponsorship for it comes from well-known 'art'-lovers whose publicity tends to portray all the values of a glossy brochure on hand-held missile launchers; and that, although computer art has been around for 38 years, it has virtually no place in the archives of contemporary art, not even in the interstices reserved for phenomena such as video or 'technological' art.

Let us, though, not be too negative: the 'art' has improved from the days—the 1970s when students in the fine art department of some college, hearing that the place had computers and wanting to explore computer art, would step timidly across the threshold of the computer room:

"Er . . . we're artists, and we've heard that you've got some . . . you know . . . computers . . ?"

The computer scientists and the programmers, some of whom have resolutely voted never to work on projects that actually kill people, and others who spend long hours boldly going with Star-man, Pac-wars and Nerd-trek, weep with gratitude.

"We're so glad," they say. "We thought you'd never come. Yes, we already make computer art. THERE IT IS!"

They point to where, Blu-tacked above the coffee-Mate, the terrified artists see—what? Snoopys, Mona Lisas, nudes and Santa Clauses, printed (or as we say 'output') from a printer as if typewriter art; symmetrical whirls and spirals as if from a supermarket drawing toy; random-number, mock-Mondrians that seem to lack a certain something; and stuff like their mothers used to make by banging nails into a piece of wood and stretching thread in between to make patterns or boats—and all of it justified as 'computer-art' because it was done with a computer and one day someone will frame it and hang it, well, if not in a proper gallery, then at least in a side room of a polytechnic where there will be real wine at the opening (or as we say 'vernissage') and their mothers will come and be totally mystified but really proud.

The art students, seeing all this, flee wailing and puking back to their studios. The computer people call them names, and realise with a little shiver of anticipation that other . . . artists . . . have been rejected—sometimes for days at a time—and *they* got famous.

Of course we can laugh at this now. How times have changed! One even finds artists employed by computer companies, just to make art! And computer art, still or animated, is seen every few minutes on television screens *even in Communist countries.*

This art is very sophisticated. It has also become much better. Not long ago, screen resolutions of 200 by 300 points, with only eight colours, were seen as the latest thing. Now, with 512 by 512 dots of up to 4096 colours seen as laughably minimalist, we have an art that is quite clearly approximately 2237 times better. Few other art forms are able to be quite so quantitative about their progress. At conferences from Berlin to Bratislava, from Paris to somewhere famous in America beginning with P, audiences thrill as they zoom into impossible universes populated by exciting teapots, cubes, spheres, and triangles; they gasp as they are told that next year the same amount of artistic creativity will go into machines whose resolution is greater than that of the human eye, with soundtracks created on the very latest Yamaha synthesisers, by people who only hours before were musically stupid.

The computer artists, often from California, bear many traces of genius. Bleary-eyed from jet-lag, they manifest that unquiet spirit of artists through the ages. Golden birds in the gilded cages of soft- or hardware companies, they find themselves so far sideways from other artists that they inhabit a kind of conceptual desert island, trudging round and round its fractal perimeter, desperately seeking SIGGRAPH. These latter-day Crusoes see tracks—they are not alone! They dream of constructing epistemologies and holding oceanic conferences; but it is only their old footsteps they are seeing, and it is not a Friday, and the artworld has sent no boats.

But perhaps we should be more serious, when faced with the fact that what might have been the most revolutionary artform ever, what could have advanced art so far that it

ABSTRACT

'Computer art' and its systems of production are criticized, and some suggestions given to make it better.

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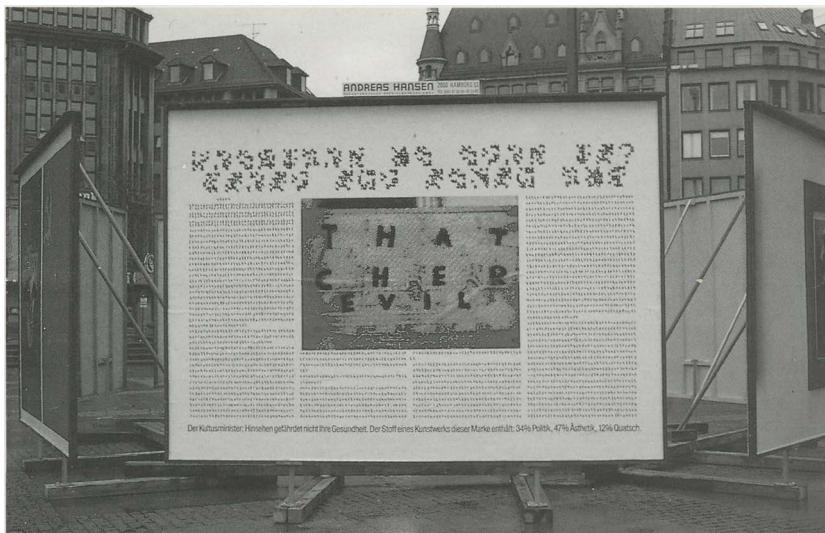
Fig. 1. Brian Reffin Smith, *That Cher Evil*, photographic reproduction of plotter drawing, 3 × 4 m, 1988. An attempt to combine several levels of representation and discourse in one piece, the work was shown in 'Public Concepts' on the streets of Hamburg, outside the town hall. For 'That Cher' read Thatcher. The 'headline' and 'text' are just representations. The lower text mimics a German smoking health warning: 'The Culture Minister advises: looking at this won't hurt your health. A work of this brand contains 34% politics, 47% aesthetics, 12% bullshit.'

actually began to answer some of the questions posed in the last 40 or so years, has been hijacked by people for whom self-delusion goes along with Thatcherite opportunism as they transform banal nonsenses into value-added insults to the intelligence.

It has been said that film is the truth 24 times a second, and video the truth (in Europe) 25 times a second. Computer art shows and conferences tend to be lies and humiliation once a year.

It is not surprising that many critics, artists, students and so on believe that computer art is only about impossible objects doing impossible things according to the impossible physical laws of impossible universes. It is impossible to believe their creators' defence that they are expanding art, or our consciousness, or something. These superficial 'impossibilities' are shackled—by chains of cynicism, delusion and real lack of imagination—to the most banal of realities. As if the worst of good art could not, at the drop of a hat, conjure multiple 'impossibilities', dimensionally so rich as to make computer graphics look like the table cloth after a chimps' tea-party, interestingly post-fractal though the latter may be.

Because they often are, or are linked to, commercial concerns, producers of 'computer art' have been able to push ideas of technological determinism (the idea that what is technologically possible is therefore desirable, even along other cultural dimensions) and of commercialism, and of spurious, meretricious representation, into the minds of those critics, artists and curators who should have known better.

Images are celebrated and justified just because they were done with a computer. (See also the trend in desktop publishing which often produces layout, typography and design of such an appallingly low standard that the only publications willing to accept it as advertising artwork are . . . computer magazines!)

In the 1960s and early 1970s, it was thought that ideas, techniques and metaphors of cybernetics and computers would transform art and culture generally into something wonderful and perhaps revolutionary. In fact, in general, computer art is the most conservative, dull, un-innovative artform of the 1980s. One would have to go back many years to find anything quite so isolated from current problems and questions of art theory, criticism and practice; so removed from any genuine cultural practice; so—as was said above—*old-fashioned*.

These things have to be repeated. Have we all gone mad? The present computer graphic systems are VERY GOOD! Thank you! Now for god's sake let us have a few ideas and do something with them. Who disagrees with this? We do not need better systems! Who does? Only the sellers of the systems or their clients from the Ministry of Peace.

Now all the above is not to suggest that there has not been, is not and cannot be any good art done by, with, or in spite of a computer. Of course there are (a few) wonderful exceptions. But it is to suggest, paradoxically, that for real progress in computer art, we must, as the title of this piece proposes, go beyond computer art. Then we may find, in the real world of art, real art problems to be tackled—and some of these may benefit from the use of a computer. Meanwhile, those who want to make graphic design, animated cartoons and so on are of course perfectly entitled to do so (we can admit through clenched teeth, not really meaning it), though it is hoped that they will not claim that they are addressing problems of contemporary art by so doing.

So . . .

1. Let us be honest and realistic and declare that graphic design and demo-reels from soft- or hardware companies are not, except under very special and rare circumstances, to be confused with art. They have different problems and are produced for different reasons according to different rules. They are (or should be) determined by different factors. They represent (or should do) different things.

2. Then let us be clear, in art schools, what we are teaching, and to whom. If it is true that ideas in art are at *least* as important as technical considerations, then let us teach computer art on that basis. We must demystify the technology, not deify it.

3. Let us acknowledge that to produce hyper-realistic models of objects often costs much time and money and computing power, but to effectively model the relations *between* representations of objects can be much cheaper. Luckily, most contemporary art recognises that it is on this meta-level that things become interesting. Computer art has much to learn from, for example, conceptual art (and, eventually perhaps, vice versa).

4. Let art schools buy 50 small computers in the place of one large one, and let the teachers be those with good art ideas, who are not scared of computers, rather than computer specialists. Do we teach painting using acrylic chemists, or video by television repair persons?

5. Let us try to make a form of computer art that companies like I.B.M., Nixdorf or Siemens would not want to buy (this is quite difficult). Let us have

shows of computer art that companies would find too dangerous to fund.

6. If we are artists who use computers, or their helpers or educators, let us try to make and encourage a new kind of computer art. It should be one that refers to quality rather than quantity. It is the pattern that connects that must be explored, not what is connected. A good idea will be good even if realised on a cheap computer, using a bad printer, monitor or graphplotter as output. A bad idea will remain bad, even when portrayed on a million-colour ultra-high resolution display. Are some people so stupid that they cannot see that it is the idea and the metaphor and the interactive capability of the computer that can make art, not having finer lines or more colours? Would Picasso have been 20% better an artist if he had 120 instead of 100 colours to use? Would Peter Greenaway make better films if film ran faster or grain were finer? Who cares, except Kodak?

7. Finally and most importantly, if the critics are mystified and the curators sometimes blind; if the teachers are confused and if the cost of the medium means that only certain messages are economically viable, let us make an art that defies all mis-representation, acting on a meta-level to avoid category mistakes. Let us include critical discourse and contextual and productive references *in the artwork itself* (Fig. 1). Let us make artworks that interact and provoke communication or that stimulate, because they contain the seeds of it, their own analysis and perception in new ways. Let us have a computer art that Walter Benjamin would have loved, that Wittgenstein would have appreciated, that would have turned Descartes into a Holist. Let us make an art that does not need the computer to justify it.

This is very difficult. Fortunately, we have the tools at hand. They cost much less than a package holiday to utopia.

Do we have the courage, and the ideas?