THE CHANGING NATURE OF ARTISTS' PRACTICE

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'Digital Art' practice often suggests an over emphasis upon applications rather than objects, reproduction over authenticity. Can 'New Media' be considered within a fine-art framework, or should it be considered as a separate discipline? The cultural shift this represents may blur, remove, or even reinforce boundaries commonly associated with the activity of fine art.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I hope to identify how there is a shifting nature of artistic practice that has developed from the late 1960's until this present day, with the increasing growth of digital technologies. I will particularly identify this through my own on going research and visual art practice.

2. BACKGROUND

In the mid sixties I studied painting at Coventry University, then known as Lancaster Polytechnic, where the atmosphere there – in the mid-1960s – was one of extreme rigor: every decision, every mark one made, had to be justified. One way of responding to that context was the theoretical exploration which Terry Atkinson, Mike Baldwin and others were involved in, which emerged as the conceptual art group *Art & Language*, which was derived from their journal, which existed as a work in conversation as early as 1966. Throughout the 1970s, *Art & Language* dealt with questions surrounding art production, and attempted a shift from the conventional "non-Linguistic" forms of art such as painting and sculpture to more theoretically based works.

I was not particularly interested in that route. I suppose I was more pragmatic, more concerned with making things: in my case, six-foot square paintings. I was working in collaboration with another student. We thought it was important to discard a number of assumptions that seemed to condition the making of art objects: the idea of the individual maker, the expressive gesture, and so on. The work itself seemed to be more important than who made it. I used screen-printing at that time as a research base of for rehearsing the colour combinations in the paintings. But as a process it also opened up a unique opportunity to produce mechanised perfection and to incorporate photographically derived images. At that time collectors and curators still could not convince themselves that screen-printing could be seen as fine art printmaking process, which had traditionally always depended on the artist's hand. These same arguments are still being applied to computer-generated imagery today.

However historically *Prints* have always had an important role to play in society and are of unique social significance.

Quote from William Ivins, Jr. (1969) *Prints and visual Communication*

‘This means that, far from being merely minor works of art, prints are among the most important and powerful tools of modern life and thought. Certainly we cannot hope to realize their actual role unless we get away from the snobbery of modern print collecting notions and definitions and begin to think of them as exactly repeatable pictorial statements or communications, without regard to the accident of rarity or what for the moment we regard as aesthetic merit. We must look at them from the point of view of general ideas and particular functions and especially we must think about the limitations which their techniques have imposed upon them as conveyors of information and on us as receivers of that information.’^[1]

My work during this period could be defined as *Minimalist*, which emerged as an abstract art movement (with roots in geometric abstraction via Malevich, the Bauhaus and Mondrian). We argued that extreme simplicity could capture all of the sublime representation needed in art. I was using mathematical principles to form the work from the ‘60s on. I was also heavily influenced by Victor Vasarely, Jesus-Rafael Soto, and the so-called ‘kinetic’ ‘Op’ artists: Yvaral, and the Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel.

1. GOLLIFER, Screenprint (1969)

3. ON THE SCREEN

In 1968 Jasia Reichardt curated an important show that was held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. *Cybernetic Serendipity* explored and developed the relationship between technology and creativity.

Quote from Jasia Reichardt, (1971) *The Computer in Art*

'The computer is only a tool which at the moment, still seems far removed from those polemic preoccupations which concern art. However, even now seen with all the prejudices of tradition and time, one cannot deny that the computer demonstrates a radical extension in art media and techniques. The possibilities inherent in the computer as a creative tool will do little to change those idioms of art which rely primarily on the dialogue between artist, his ideas and the canvas. They will, however, increase the scope of art and contribute to its diversity.'^[2]

2. Cybernetic Serendipity at the ICA 1968

This proved to be a very significant and pioneering exhibition, enabling artists to see the potential that computers had for producing and generating images.

Some of the artists in the I.C.A. exhibition demonstrated, for the first time, algorithmic computer-generated art works. Their still images, produced on a computer, were rarely intended to be *viewed* on a computer. It is only in recent years, with the advent of high-resolution monitors, plasma screens and the distribution of images 'virtually' by the Internet, and more specifically using the World Wide Web, that output from a computer has not been an enormous hurdle. Obtaining adequate printed output has been a problem for which solutions have been developed over a considerable time. Initially, they could be made with a computer-driven graphic plotter, a pen moving along a horizontal rod,

drawing onto the paper, which was rolled on a vertically moving drum. Each line was composed of very small steps: each step corresponded to a specific instruction conveyed to the plotter from the magnetic tape. Next, there were many types of printers, which could produce patterns composed of letters and other type symbols. Briefly, artists used a cathode ray tube display or television screen on which to draw with fleeting patterns of light, which could be preserved photographically; Later developments included dot-matrix inkjet, thermal wax transfer, electrostatic pigment transfer, dye sublimation and laser-printed photography. These devices emerged in parallel with the development of bit-mapped graphics, for which the pixel is the basic component

I was very much inspired by the *Cybernetic Serendipity* show, but when I tried to get involved and have access to computers, there always seemed to be a series of obstacles. Few artists in the Sixties had access to such computer or output equipment, or were trained in the specialised programming needed at the time to gain control over the machine. So I decided to turn myself into a computer, doing the calculations and measurements the hard way.

It was only in the 1980s, with the introduction of the personal computer and interactive graphics - paint/draw applications - that artist-printmakers were able to see the full potential use of the computer as a creative tool. When I finally had access to a personal computer, in the '80s, the calculations, which once occupied hours, and involved painstaking measurement with ruler and compass, could be completed with greater accuracy in seconds, leaving more time for the purely artistic judgments. In fact, the work I do now, entirely with computers, looks far less 'computer-generated' than the work I used to do entirely by hand: it has to do with being liberated from the tiresome tasks, and being able to concentrate on the images and colours.

In 1990, I was seconded as an Academic Researcher to the *Rediffusion Simulation Research Centre*, which subsequently became the *Centre for Computers and Creative Work (CCCW)*. My early research was into the link between the use of new technology and the traditional Fine Art practice of Printmaking. The application of computer technology is particularly suited to the art of printmaking. The use of computers affords the artist-printmaker both an unprecedented variety of techniques, approaches, and working methods – a new repertoire of media and processes – and a variety of ways in which the production and decision stages can be made more efficient and more effective. However the integration of computer-generated imagery with more traditional printmaking processes, through the media of screenprint, lithography, relief printing, letterpress or etching, creates opportunities for further developments, such as enhanced colour stability and an emphasis on physicality, allowing for mediation, recording and conversion.

To develop this research further I had the opportunity of curating *ArCade*, the First UK Open International Exhibition of Digital Fine Art Prints, as part of the first *Computers in Art and Design Education (CADE)* conference held at the University of Brighton in 1995. The initial intention behind the exhibition was an opportunity to demonstrate visually my research practice - *a new print medium and a hybrid link between both old and new technologies, to create a convergence of ideas, disciplines and practices.*

Subsequently I went on to curate *ArCade's* - II (1998), III (2001), & IV (2003- 5), V (2007), BitStream (2002), & GAMUT (1998 & 2007).

What lessons if any can be drawn/learnt from any of these exhibitions, particularly *ArCade*; did I achieve any of my original intentions and objectives?

Quote from Sue Gollifer *ArCade*

‘Since I have been curating the ArCade exhibitions, questions such as the of longevity and the light-fast properties of the inks have now broadly been resolved, and digital prints are now entering museum collections. In addition, the cost of high-resolution printers has been dramatically reduced, making this form of printing available to students and artists alike. Furthermore, the new generation of printers allow for a wide range of substrates to be used, from hand made paper through to plastics. I hope the Arcade IV exhibition demonstrates how digital fine art prints, offers the possibility of generating ‘radically new’ physical; aesthetic and conceptual frameworks.’^[3]

3. *ArCade IV*, the Novosibirsk State Art Museum, Siberia (2004)

4. BEYOND THE SCREEN

The use of digital imaging makes this an exciting, challenging, and innovative time to be an artist investigating new potentials. It also encouraged a major revaluation of fine art processes in general, raising the issues of authenticity and ownership. These are current issues within contemporary art practice.

Quote Lev Manovich (2001) *The Language of New Media*

The Computer revolution affects all stages of communication, including acquisition, manipulation, storage and distribution; it also affects all types of media-texts, still images, moving images, sound and spatial constructions. How shall we begin to map out the effects of this fundamental shift? What are the ways in which the use of computers to record, store, create, and distribute media makes it “new?”^[4]

An example of new opportunities to exhibit and display work was shown in the SIGGRAPH Art Gallery Show *Synaesthesia*, which I curated in August 2004, as Art Gallery Chair.

Quote from Gollifer (2004) SIGGRAPH- Art Gallery *Synaesthesia*

‘This year’s theme *Synaesthesia* demonstrates how artists can excite and stimulate the senses using technology to create art that ranges from low-tech digital plotters to high-end computer graphics and animation.’^[5]

5. SIGGRAPH Art Gallery’05 *Synaesthesia* - Touch the Drop by Kushiya

The exhibition showed work by visionary artists in all areas of digital art that stimulated the senses, including 2D, 3D, interactive techniques, installations, multimedia, telecommunications, screen-based work, and computer animation. The viewers to the Art Gallery were encouraged to see, hear, and touch the art. New ways of experiencing

art and an opportunity to be engaged interact with the artwork itself both physically and virtually, and blurring the distinction between 'original' and 'reproduction'.

Quote from Margot Lovejoy (1997)

‘Photomechanical reproduction raised questions about the ‘uniqueness’ of copies as art, thus undermining the existing function of art not only because it could provide visual reportage, but because it threatened the aura of the handmade object which relied on the specialised skills of the artists.’^[6]

This also raises one of the crucial issues in the field of computer-generated art: the intangibility of the artwork. The work is essentially a freely available signal, rather than a visual artefact, which can be packaged, marketed and sold. Another issue is that of authenticity: who 'owns' it- does it even exist? Computer-aided art in its purest form is not concerned with artefact but with communication and interaction (New Media). Thus raising issues concerned with the ontology of the art object and the identity of the artist in relation to the work.

6. ArCade V in Second Life (2007)

A broader definition of its possibilities of digital art in all its hybrid forms. Creating a synergy between processes old and new and opening up new areas of freedom and diversity, establishing a unique repertoire of aesthetic tools be they instant transmissive digital images in the social networking spaces and the endless identical reproduction open to revision, evolution, collaborative manipulation and cross-disciplinary utilization via the Internet in a vastly expanded creative domain.

IN CONCLUSION.

So 'Digital Art' or 'New Media Art' now exists in a multiple of contexts, and in a myriad of forms and covers a broad range of artistic practices, which can not be described in terms of one form of aesthetics or as one form of art practice. It exists within the new conceptual spaces, through virtual worlds and distributed networks; thus allowing for mediation and transactions, and offering the possibility of generating 'radically new' physical and aesthetic frameworks.

References

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- [4] Manovich L, (2001) *Language of New Media*, p19, The MIT Press
- [5] GOLLIFER S. (2004) *SIGGRAPH 2004 Electronic Art and Animation Catalogue*, Computer Graphics Annual Conference Series. ACM SIGGRAPH. 2004
- [6] LOVEJOY Margot (1997) *'Post-modern Currents - Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic Media'*, p 36 Prentice Hall

Electronic Resources

Inter Society of Electronic Art (ISEA)
<http://www.isea-web.org/>
DIGITAL ART MUSEUM (DAM)
<http://dam.org/>
SIGGRAPH Art Gallery'04
<http://www.siggraph.org/artdesign/gallery/S04/>