The Art on the Net

What is the future of art? Sean Clark takes a look at what's happening to art in the UK as the Net begins to make its presence felt.

There has always been more to art than oil paintings on gallery walls. In fact, used in its broadest sense, 'art' encompasses almost all forms of creative expression - classical and popular music, painting, dance, literature, sculpture, and so on. However, for many of us the word 'art' is still largely synonymous with the production of 'artistic objects' - be they in the form of paintings, sculptures, photographs or 'installations'. It's fair to say, therefore, that most people have come to expect 'works of art' to have some sort of lasting presence in the physical world. Yet, as digital technology becomes ever more pervasive we are seeing the emergence of a new generation of artists who have little interest in producing 'real objects' - in the physical sense - but instead see the world of the computer and the Internet as their artistic domain.

For these artists the digital realm represents a new frontier. A medium in which the 'rules of creative engagement' have yet to be fully formulated. And as this new generation begins to understand the creative boundaries of their adopted medium they are challenging the accepted definitions of 'art', 'artistic practice' and the notion of 'the artwork'.

For example, established artists such as William Latham is now using computers to create highly elaborate forms that do not - in fact could not - be completely reproduced out of the domain of the computer. For artists like Latham, the conventional 'art gallery' is no longer the only way of distributing their artwork to their audience - in fact, the computer disc, videotape and the Internet have all become essential parts of the way they present their work to the public. What's more, since this work is both created and distributed digitally, the whole notion of the 'original' begins to loose its meaning. For example, is that copy of a William Latham sculpture running on your PC at home any less of an 'original' than the version he created in his studio?

In addition to using computers to create work, many electronic artists who work in 'collectives', such as those in the 'Resonance' group, now see art as part of a group activity that can bring together technologists, musicians, and other creative people, as well as those who use the traditional label of 'artist'. For these groups, and many of them now exist around the world, Information Technology provides a means of communicating and sharing artistic ideas as well as being their medium of creation. This concept of sharing ideas and working in groups is quite different to that of the classical artist, working solo, and keeping his ideas secret until they were published.

Similarly other groups, such as the people behind the Arts Council-supported ArtAIDS LINK project, are using the Internet to run longterm collaborative arts projects - the likes of which would simply not be possible without computer technologies. In fact, it's fascinating to observe that those involved in projects such as ArtAIDS LINK are now using computers and computer networks as a means of image creation, artistic collaboration and then distribution and exhibition of their work. Not a single paintbrush, canvas or traditional gallery in sight.

Although all of these artists and groups produce very different artworks, they have one thing in common. That is, a desire to use technology to push forward the boundaries of creative practice and to create artwork that is not simply a product of new technology, but is a result of their creative engagement with it. And as Art Colleges and Universities all around the UK continue to divert funds from 'traditional' areas to digital practice, more and more artists will no doubt find themselves working in this way...

The Organic Art of William Latham

Perhaps the best known computer artist in the UK is former IBM Fellow and graduate of Oxford University and the Royal College of Art, William Latham. Latham's distinctive artwork is 'created using 'organic evolution software' that allows him to grow highly complex and beautiful 3D computer sculptures from a set of simple starting shapes. Working with a team of computer programmers, Latham is able to behave in a God-like way, using basic Darwinian rules such as 'survival of the fittest' to evolve his artwork inside the world of the computer.

As well as leading to exciting work, Latham's approach to being an artist is also interesting in that he has managed to successfully combine a career as an exhibiting artist - showing work in galleries around the world - with a more commercial role - working on pop videos, computer games and even a screensaver. By doing this he has solved one of the main problems that hinders artists working in the digital realm - how to make a living creating artwork that can be infinitely reproduced without any loss of quality.

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For Latham the resolution to this problem was undoubtedly helped by the fact that he - and his technical team - have developed a highly unique and instantly recognisable visual style. A style that is widely acknowledged as being 'his' and is clearly seen by the multimedia industry (one which still lacks many of the creative skills needed to design truly exciting products) as being commercially 'desirable'.

Recently, Latham has begun to take an interest in using the Internet as a way of distributing his work. When we last talked he told me of his plans to distribute two modules of his 'Organic Art' screensaver for free via the Net. This software package will allow people to create their own dynamic Lathamesque sculptures which can be saved and used as screensavers on their PC. He hopes to give people the opportunity to freely try this innovative software by distributing the two modules over the Net in this way. There have also been discussions about a project that would make some features of the 'Mutator' software used by Latham accessible via a World Wide Web interface. This will give you the opportunity to create your own 'organically-grown' 3D artworks via the Web...

However, until these interactive Internet projects are online, you will have to be content, looking at the less-dynamic, but still very beautiful, 2D examples of William Latham's work that can be found on the World Wide Web. In particular, if you point your Web browser at **http://www.drci.co.uk/drci/shamen/axis-mutatis/** you will find an extensive gallery of his work as part of the Web document for the new Shamen album. Get ready to be transported into a new world...

Organic Art will be commercially released in the new year, with the free modules being available on the Internet in December. Keep an eye on William's entry on the Shamen site at **http://www.drci.co.uk/drci/shamen/** for details. William Latham's company, Computer Artworks, can be reached at **info@artworks.co.uk.**

Latham's organic art, coming soon to the Net.

One important aspect of the way William Latham operates is that he works with a team of technical people who assist in the realisation of his ideas. This approach, while common for film makers (in that while the Director is seen as having overall artistic control, numerous other creative people help in the production of the film) it is less common for 'fine' artists (although it is certainly not unheard of). In fact, the classic image of the artist is as a solitary Van Gogh-like figure slaving away in isolation. However, when artists enter the digital realm it is often the case that they have to call upon the assistance of others due to the fact that the technology may simply be too complex for any one individual to fully master. Also, computer technology itself - and in particular the Internet - often encourages collaborative activities: with email, MUDs and MOOs and even the Web allowing people to communicate and share ideas.

Two further examples of how artists and technologists can work together on arts-related projects are the recent 'LiveWire' and 'Cybercaff' events held as part of the six-week 1995 Derby Photography Festival. The first of these was co-ordinated by computer artist Geoff Broadway from the Design Research Centre (with technical assistance from others in the Centre) and consisted of a combined 'real' and 'virtual' exhibition of electronic artwork based around the Festival's 1995 theme of 'Displacements'. The 'real', that is physically-located, LiveWire exhibition took place in the School of Art and Design at the University of Derby - with the artwork being displayed as a set of large paper-based prints. Whereas the 'virtual' exhibition took place - and is still being shown - on the Internet, with images and explanatory text from the contributing artists being combined to produce a World Wide Web document.

The LiveWire event was interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was the result of a collaboration between an artist and technical people. Secondly, the artwork itself is generally of a high quality and, as you'll see if you point your Web-browser at **http://www.drci.co.uk/livewire/**, is presented in a visually appealing way. And finally, and perhaps of more 'philosophical' interest to other artists, is the manner in which the artwork was produced and collected. In almost every case it was generated on a computer and was sent

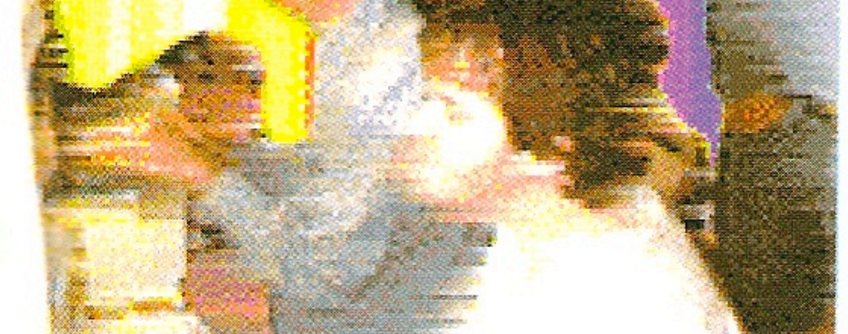
Modern art presented in a visually appealing way?

by the creator to the exhibition organiser electronically in response to a call for entries made via the Internet. Hence, as with William Latham's 3D computer artwork, when you view the LiveWire Web document you are looking at work which (until the 'real' LiveWire exhibition) may never have left the digital domain and therefore you see, in a manner of speaking, the 'original' work and not simply a reproduction.

The second Internet-arts event held during the Photography Festival was the 'Cybercaff', presented by Derby-based arts/technology group Resonance with music from ambienteers EarthStation. The Cybercaff (a name chosen to distinguish it from the overused and trademarked term 'cybercafé') ran for three days during September's Agents of Change conference organised by Birmingham-based arts group Seeing the Light. The Cybercaff was located in the centre of Derby and brought together photographers, fine artists, musicians, DJs and technologists for a long weekend of ambient music, chat, collaborations and of course Net-surfing. This event - which required the combined effort of a team of artists and technologists in order to make it happen - was also freely open to the people of Derby and hence provided an environment in which the general public could explore the Internet.

The Cybercaff was seen by most people who attended, as a great success - providing a space in which people *could meet, discuss future projects and enjoy themselves.* It also clearly demonstrated that one of the best ways to organise an arts event such as this is to form an interdisciplinary group. Quite simply, if only artists had attempted to organise it then there may have been more in the way of technical problems, conversely if it was a purely technical event would have been rather, ahem, 'geeky'. Instead, music, lights, electronic artworks and Internet computers created an inspirational environment that one visitor described as 'a cross between club and bedroom culture!' and what's more, despite being filled with computers the space bore no resemblance to a University computer Lab...

The LiveWire exhibition can be viewed on the Internet at **http://www.drci.co.uk/livewire/** or by visiting the School of Art and Design, Britannia Mill, Derby. Contact **G.Broadway@derby.ac.uk** for details. Resonance will be helping to run the UK's first 'CyberLaundrette' event at the end of October - sponsored by, you guessed it, Surf! For details on this, and a full report on the Cybercaff, look at their Web site at **http://www.drci.co.uk/resonance/**.



Cybercaff, part of the1995 Derby Photography Festival.

Events such as the Cybercaff may be good examples of how people can work together on collaborative projects, but it's often the case many of the people who might benefit from working together cannot meet in person. For example, they may be separated by long distances, or they may simply never get to meet 'in real life'. LiveWire was one project in which the Net was used to overcome these real-world limitations, but another - far more ellaborate - example of how people can work together in this way is ArtAIDS LINK, details of which can be found at **http://artaids.dcs.qmw.ac.uk:8001/**.

ArtAIDS LINK, like LiveWire, is an Internet-based gallery of artwork submitted by artists from around the world. However, unlike the Derby exhibition, ArtAIDS LINK has no parallel 'physical' presence - the entire project is based on the Internet. Also, importantly, it is a 'live' ongoing project that can be continually added to.

The project itself is intended as 'an Internet art project for online, digital artists to commemorate and celebrate the fight against AIDS.' With the project organisers (which include Cambridge Darkroom Gallery, Queen Mary and Westfield College London, University College London and Roarke Associates) providing facilities for storage and transfer of computer-based art objects between remote users.

As well as containing thought-provoking imagery, ArtAIDS is one of the most complete examples on the Internet of how a World Wide Web server can be adapted to function as a collaborative space. Images can be posted electronically via email or FTP and the 'gallery' is constructed via a set of programs, or scripts, which allow the pages to expand quickly without the need for extensive re-coding of their HTML structure. Hence, the site uses the latest in Internet technology combined with the latest techniques in artistic expression to spread information about one of the latest and most dangerous of human diseases, AIDS.

The Future?

So, we now have 'computer artists', 'Internet galleries', artwork which never leaves the world of the computer, and collaborative art spaces that allow the creation of arts communities that transcend national boundaries with ease. It's extraordinary to observe that in just a few years the Internet - and computer technology in general - has changed from being a medium primarily for technologists and researchers, into one that is now attracting a great deal of interest from artists - the very people who would have shunned it in the past, believing that it only had value to the 'computer nerd'.

As this 'new media' develops it will undoubtedly attract even more interest from creative people such as these. But why should those of us who don't see ourselves as 'artists' or perhaps in the past would rarely be seen in an art gallery be particularly excited about the coming of these new arty Net users? Well, the answer is relatively straightforward. For the Internet to be truly accessible it has to reflect all human interests. Areas such as technology, business, education, research, entertainment and art will all need to be a part of the Internet of the future (or whatever it turns into). Only then will the supporters of the Net be able to confidently say that it has the makings of a truly world-changing medium...

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