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LEONARDO THINKS

Opinion: The Latest Developments in Media Art

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Observers of media art notice that a new turning point has been reached. Perhaps this will lead to a decisive breakthrough. Art critics and philosophers are proclaiming the dawning of a new epoch, a "second modernism" characterized by the application of new media. The Austrian Pavilion at the Biennale in Venice in 1995, which was completely dedicated to media art, can be seen as proof of that development. (It has, however, been overlooked completely that there had already been a special show of computer graphics dedicated to constructivism in 1970.)

The recognition of media art has its repercussions, however. Judging from firsthand impression, one could well speak of a final legitimation of what had so far been allocated to the field of computer graphics/computer art. Among other effects, this forces us to look at events of the past from different angles, to judge many of the works created since 1963 under a different light. Suddenly, all that had been criticized and scorned by the old critics is considered to be revealing and interesting. The graphics created at that time, all of them still without serial number and certificate to prove their authenticity, are suddenly of value. Old computers are being recovered from cellars and shacks so that reconstructed programs can be run on them.

We were at such a turning point once before, around 1980, when computer graphic results were for the first time leaving the laboratories and offices. Designers, people in the advertising business and film people were the ones who wanted to use these pictures, and thus an aesthetic aspect was involved, even if only as a secondary effect. But it was the first time that a broader circle of people realized that these pictures from plotters and monitors could attain considerable commercial importance. All of a sudden, a positive interest in computer graphics arose, and quite a number of former opponents changed sides and became experts, supporters and, yes, even pioneers of this course. While until that time scientists, technicians, mathematicians and programmers had determined the mode of creating pictures, now conventionally educated historians were in control. Naturally, the winds that determine the direction had to change as well.



The attitudes of many of these new experts are still rooted in conventional ways of thinking, and even when confronted with computer graphics and video sequences they are thinking in concepts of "originals" and unique works. The possibility of "unlimited reproducibility," as Walter Benjamin put it, is a thorn in their sides. But even worse: many of them are trying to introduce the criteria of the present-day official art style into computer graphics. This is reflected in the selection of pictures for exhibitions, in publications, at the awarding of prizes to artists; it directs the distribution of support and assistance. Computer graphics that most resemble traditional hand-painted pictures are being favored. This burgeoning acknowledgment of media art by the experts has been paid for dearly: what had previously had the chance to develop according to its own laws is now being taken in hand. The consequences can be traced further. They even have their effects on the hardware and software sector. An example was the arrival of paint systems on the market. They were welcomed by artists and designers who wanted to avoid having to learn a programming language. Computers made it possible: the classic process of applying color onto paper was now being simulated. The designer uses an induction pen on a tablet exactly as he or she formerly had used paint brushes and pencils.

The consequence of this, however, is that, when users are simulating an old method, on principle nothing new will evolve. The experts do not mind: this way, the resulting works perfectly resemble the relevant conventional artworks. One thing, however, should not be forgotten: the revolting news about computer art is that the new method is totally different from the old one. The paint systems are useful and comfortable. One can do a lot with them. In doing this, however, one will stay rooted in the old methods of thinking and creating and thus stand in one's own way.

What on principal is new? It is not so much the instrument as the thinking. Those who want to work as pioneers work have to cope with structural problems first. They have to try and understand the underlying graphic order of any picture they have in mind. They have to try to put ideas into formulas that can be introduced into a program. For the designer this means having to think in a way that is completely new, a way that could well be called algorithmic.

I am not saying anything against the conventional way of creating art-it will keep its importance. But when thinking about the qualifications of computer-graphic systems as artistic instruments, we have to judge by whether or not they contribute to overcoming the existing status.

Can computer art-the programmed act of creation-really lead us to fields that are closed to classical art? As we all know by now, computer-generated creation leads to motion, to interactivity. In this sector, thinking in the old categories will lead to a dead-end street. In order to develop the method further, it is necessary to think in terms of algorithms, to have command over the structures. It is in a sense a more profound level of working with pictures, of creating them. Development is heading towards genetic programs, where universal laws for the construction of structural deployment can take effect. Employing this method leads directly into virtual space. Pictures are no longer enclosed in frames-the media artist leads the viewer into an unlimited three-



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dimensional world that is his or her original creation. The media artist has not built it from elements and building blocks but has analyzed it in all its correlations, growth processes and structural alternatives. Media artists can build their worlds according to existing laws, but they can also set up their worlds according to their own laws, by laying out the germ and watching what evolves from it. In this scenario the artist is the creator.

Our future world will be a world made of data-aggregates, of virtual spaces. A big part of what artists create will sit in the computer store waiting to be used. In this way, digital art will be more and more like music: it will become dynamic, moving in time; it will be storable and it will be possible to spread it via channels. In the future, in place of the PC will be a terminal with a new type of output equipment with enclosed cyberspace aggregates. Over the networks, users will download the spaces where they want to be, from all over the world-and not only from the real world. But somewhere, in the rooms of museums, there will still be "experts" sitting in front of installations of piled-up monitors with flickering screens-after all, it is the hardware that characterizes these works as art. Only in the hardware will yesterday's elite be able to find the originals and the unique artworks. But in the age of media art, the concepts of originals and "unique works" do not make sense.

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