EDITORIAL

COMPUTERS, ART AND CONTEXT

Art evolves with and is influenced by the development of many technologies and many diverse media. While histories of specific media exist, we rarely consider art history in terms of the history of the technologies employed by artists. Rather, we consider the art tradition part of the cultural and historical moment. Until recently there has been a tendency to conceptualize the historical framework of computer art in terms of technology. This is understandable, since the history of computers must be a history of the evolution of technology, and a common view holds that computer artists find more acceptance from the computer community than from the art community. Recent discussion about the relationship between computer art and the mainstream artworld prompted the SIGGRAPH ’89 art show committee to call for, and here to present, essays about the context of computers and art as well as reproductions of the artworks selected for the exhibition.

Artists have always participated in the activities of the Association for Computing Machinery’s Special Interest Group on Computer Graphics (ACM/SIGGRAPH). SIGGRAPH has developed into a prominent forum for exchange of ideas about computer graphics. The SIGGRAPH annual meeting functions as an academic conference presenting technical papers and panel discussions, a place to continue education by offering tutorials in various aspects of computer graphics, a meeting place for special interest sub-groups, a large equipment and hardware exhibition, and a provider of various venues for presentation of artworks made using computer graphic techniques, including a juried art exhibition as well as animation and film screening.

SIGGRAPH has championed the cause of arts and artists using computers. But do not misunderstand the interest of ‘technological’ organizations like SIGGRAPH in artmaking. The support for artists is not just support for ‘art for art’s sake’. The changes in perception and communication that result from artists using computers are profound. The fastest system for information gathering and understanding is the human visual system. The path from the eyes to the brain is among the shortest and the most massively parallel in all of the nervous system. Throughout history, artists have been actively involved in accessing this powerful visual system for intellectual and aesthetic communication. Artists continually strive to develop techniques for manipulating large amounts of information in order to create works that allow the viewer an aesthetic experience. Communicating at the speed of the human visual system with tools like computers to sort through vast amounts of information will allow us to end the ‘Information Age’.

“Computer Art in Context: The SIGGRAPH ’89 Art Show Catalog” considers many of the questions of the context of computer art. It is clear that computer art will profoundly affect our art-historical and cultural contexts, as artists initiate the change from art-for-display to network participation. Artmaking is a serious activity, and vision is still the essential ingredient. New, fast machines or sophisticated algorithms, while impressive, do not substitute for vision in works of art. We must participate from within our context, not apart from it.

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