

Not only computing — also art

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IT82 Year

The fact that this is Information Technology Year seems not yet to have impacted on the public consciousness. Perhaps this is because, whilst a number of IT activities are going on all around the country, the whole is rather too diffuse to have any real effect. A better plan, I think, would have been to have had a single, large-scale exhibition lasting three or four months — maybe not as large as the Festival of Britain, but certainly on the lines of the British Genius exhibition of a few years ago, though I realise that the resources (particularly time) necessary to do this were limited. However, the subject is important enough to the country as a whole and to all our future lives and livelihoods, to warrant a much more concentrated, imaginative and broad-canvas treatment than it has presently received. This is not to criticise a very good, but comparatively small-scale, attempt at encapsulating the scope and nature of IT now on at the Science Museum in London. Here, its designers have brought together a goodly number of examples of IT applications and have arranged them well to illustrate what IT is and how it is used. It gives the flavour of what a large-scale exhibition would have been like, but is well worth a visit for its own sake.

And now, something to read

The growing interest in computer graphics has, quite naturally, spawned an increasing amount of literature on the subject. Two especially good examples have recently come to hand. Firstly, *Fundamentals of Interactive Computer Graphics* by J. D. Foley and A. Van Dam (Addison-Wesley Publishing Co, 1982) which is an excellent textbook covering a wide range of relevant software and hardware matters in an extremely thorough manner. Foley and Van Dam take an ACM SIGGRAPH CORE approach to graphics programming which, whilst not quite the same as the GKS approach likely to become standard in the UK, is sufficiently like it for the Pascal procedures given in the book to be used with little alteration. This is a major effort rivalling Newman and Sproull's seminal work, *Principles of Interactive Computer Graphics* (McGraw-Hill, 1973) — it will, I am sure, be fully reviewed in a later issue of the *Computer Bulletin*. The second

book, *Raster Graphics Handbook*, is not credited with an author but is published as a paperback by Conrac Division, 600 North Rimsdale Ave, Covina, Calif 91722 (although my copy came from Conrac Elektron of Germany). This, too, is an extremely useful book bringing together a lot of interesting detail about raster graphics and, particularly, TV technology and colour specification. It is well written and illustrated and is mainly for the beginner, but the more experienced would also find it of value. The author, or authors, deserve congratulations — even though we aren't told who they are.

50 (or maybe 49), not out

The Computer Arts Society will shortly publish the 50th issue of its *Bulletin*, PAGE. This is something of a milestone in small art magazine publication — not many manage so many issues, even though we have taken nearly 15 years to do so. For reasons which I will not go into, PAGE 50 is, in fact, only the 49th issue to hit the streets. (Note the newspaper parlance.) PAGE 46 still has to be published — and will be, someday soon. Everyone interested in the sorts of things discussed in this column would find PAGE of interest. Why not join the CAS and get your copies? We could do with the subscribers as the Arts Council grant we were fortunate to have last year will not be given us in 1982-83. Come on, help us go on to PAGE 100. £4.00 is all it costs for four glorious issues!

Canadian art

One of our members, Brian Reffin Smith, who is College Tutor in Computing in Art and Design at the Royal College of Art, has recently helped put together an exhibition at the Cultural Centre Gallery at Canada House under the title of ARTISTS/COMPUTERS/ART. This brought together the work of seven artists and composers who use computers in their work. Figures such as Barry Truax and Norman White were represented as well as Jacques Palumbo, one of whose screenprints is reproduced in Figure 1. Due to combination of circumstances, I was not able to attend the exhibition, but am told by those who did that it was excellent.

Brian does not like the term 'Computer Art' and, in his Introduction to

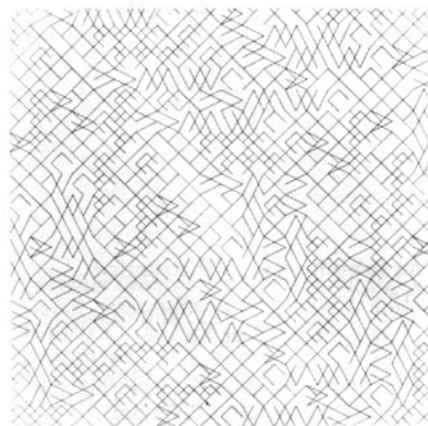


Figure 1

the exhibition catalogue has some scathing things to say about some of the works that are produced in its name. He says

'The first point to make is that computers cannot justify anything. A bad artist or designer, a mediocre poet or unimaginative musician will, if they use a computer, merely produce miles of bad art, reams of mediocre poetry, storms of awful sounds, and this happens often. It is usually accompanied by much shouting about technological and cultural breakthrough from the perpetrators or, more often, their curators. Much so-called "computer-art" is nonsense: had it been produced by a pencil and ruler, or by some plastic drawing toy from a supermarket, no one would look at it twice.

This situation has arisen from two separate but connected roots. Firstly, so much previous work has been produced either by artists who know nothing about the technology or, usually even worse, technologists who know nothing of art. There is no reason why computer scientists should be, *per se*, excellent artists; nor why artists who might spend a long time getting used to some other high technology such as printmaking should not have to spend a certain amount of time understanding computers and information technology.'

Whilst one cannot quarrel with his basic conclusion, I believe his distinction between 'artists' and others to be an artificial one. As yet perhaps few works of lasting value have been produced with computer assistance. When they are, there is no guarantee that they will be made by those who call themselves 'artists' as opposed to those who call themselves 'technologists' (or, for that matter, 'shopkeepers' or 'civil servants'). One thing is fairly certain: they will be works which could not have been produced any other way than with computer aid.