

# HOW QUANTEL'S PAINTBOX CHANGED OUR WORLD

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THE COMPUTER ARTS SOCIETY

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Designed by kimmanesabbott.com

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Paintbox has totally revolutionized the notion of art  
and the image - why hasn't anyone noticed?

Keith Haring

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9th May - 30th June. Phoenix. Leicester

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curated by Adrian Wilson

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6th Dec - 23rd February. BCS. London

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# Intro | The Exhibition Context

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**Digital history is full of forgotten software and computers but none are more significant and influential than Quantel's Paintbox. In this, the 50th anniversary of Quantel, the Computer Arts Society are proud to honour a British digital art and design studio which was a decade ahead of Silicon Valley and became the global standard in both television and photographic digital manipulation.**

**Quantel's 1981 Paintbox was launched before Adobe even existed, bringing digital Art & Design into our homes and establishing the visual language of our current screen-based lives.**

**Television in 1981 was as all pervasive and dominant in people's lives then as phones are in ours now. It was how we got our news and weather, it was how we learned about things and it was, thanks to Atari, even how we played our games.**

It was the year the first Space Shuttle and MTV launched but, despite the cutting-edge technology of a decade that would bring us CD players, VHS recorders and home video cameras, TV graphics were still distinctly analogue, with magnetic clouds weather maps, lettraset type and hand-drawn logos.

Paintbox changed all that. Based in Newbury, Quantel were a small broadcast tech company that had been the first to crack how to combine two live images on one screen. Though seemingly obvious now, this was a giant leap which not only brought fame and success to Quantel but also led to the reality of being able to use one layer of video to manipulate the layer below. Once they had cracked it at broadcast quality, Quantel could now digitally manipulate any image instantly, which enabled the artist or designer to paint, airbrush, cut, paste and add text to any image - even a live video. What used to take 2 weeks could now be done in two hours.

TV executives loved that exciting new look graphics attracted more viewers and more advertising revenue. Designers loved that there was now no mess, no smell and no constraints to their imagination. This was the start of the era when viewers first learned how to discern between good or bad design and on-screen graphics started to influence our culture instead of lagging far behind it.

Paintbox thrust the world into the modern age and kickstarted this, our fascination for digital effects and acceptance that nothing is as it appears to be.

The issue with the Paintbox was its price. At £125,000 each (the equivalent of £600,000 today), the only ones who could afford it were large TV Networks or post-production studios. Paintbox was the equivalent of Google's search engine in as much as it was a huge part of everyone's daily lives but nobody actually got to see one in real life. Quantel understood that the success of their machine depended on the artists who used it and involved them in every stage, from designing the famously user-friendly UI and pressure sensitive pen, to using their feedback to refine the software features.

Quantel's achievement was that the user required no computer knowledge at all and everything was so familiar that they would forget it was a computer. The Paintbox was there to serve the user, not the other way around. Artists and other creatives were desperate for access to the Paintbox so Quantel donated three to be shared among nine art colleges around Britain. Many artists were invited to use the latest versions and also given a paid apprenticeship at Quantel. For other creatives, the only way to get access to this, the holy grail of digital art machines, was to beg for downtime during the night when hourly rates were lower or even free.

Quantel introduced a photo quality Paintbox in 1986, four years before Photoshop 1.0 was released. In fact, "paintboxed" was a verb long before "photoshopped". Most digital graphics and effects on TV, music videos and even manipulated photos seen on screens around the world in the 1980's were created on the Paintbox. As cheaper PC and Mac based software solutions took over in the 90's, the Paintbox lost its dominance and was ultimately Photoshopped out of digital history by the digital dominance of Adobe and Silicon Valley.

This exhibition restores its rightful place.

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## 01 | Jennifer Bartlett

### **Untitled 1986**

Bartlett found the interesting thing about the Paintbox was to “work for two days on a series of drawings which do not exist ... There were never any **real** drawings even though they had the **appearance** of real drawings”- the same philosophical and artistic quandary we have about digital images today.

## 02 | Richard Bernstein

### **Grace Jones Album Cover 1986 - Album cover & dust sleeve scans**

Bernstein was the cover artist and logo designer of Andy Warhol's Interview magazine but following two iconic Paintbox record covers for Grace Jones, Bernstein was the first artist to have a solo show of Paintbox art, curated by Joan Agajanian Quinn, at Cornerstone Gallery, Beverley Hills in 1991.

## 03 | Chiara Boeri

### **Blue Dream 1984 - Digital file**

Selected for the Siggraph Art Show over a record 20 years. An important 1960's activist against racism while in the US, Boeri and her husband Cesare Massarenti left for Paris and set up CVF, their 'Digital House of Medici', with France's first Paintbox in 1983.

## 04 | April Greiman

### **Posters for MoMA and AIGA 1988 - Poster scans**

One of USA's most celebrated designers, April Greiman describes herself as a 'transmedia Artist' and her work defined both the New Wave style and Postmodern Design. Transitioning to Apple, Greiman recalled that “The Mac seemed like it mimicked everything the high-end Paintboxes could do.”

## 05 | Richard Hamilton

### **Just what is it that makes today's homes so different? 1992 - Scan of digital print**

Richard Hamilton was so impressed with the Paintbox in 1986, that he bought one for his studio. From conceptualizing paintings now in the Tate Modern, to using it to update his classic 50's pop art interior, Hamilton completely immersed himself in the Paintbox's creative potential.

## 06 | Keith Haring

### **Pisa 1989 - Paintbox digital output file**

A few months before his untimely death, Haring flew to Rome just to work on a Paintbox. Intrigued by computer's impact on art and culture throughout his life, Haring excitedly wrote about the prescient changes that the Paintbox heralded in his Journal, yet was surprised “..why hasn't anyone noticed?”

## 07 | David Hockney

### **Celia Birtwell 1985 - 35mm Paintbox output slide**

Hockney spent eight hours on the Paintbox at Quantel in June 1985, recording the pilot for the 'Painting With Light' series, shown on the BBC in 1987. This unseen portrait of Hockney's muse, Celia Birtwell, was never broadcast but was fortunately rescued after one of Quantel's many takeover clearouts.

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## 08 | Martin Holbrook

### **Spitfire 1981/82 - Paintbox digital output file**

One of the earliest known pieces of Paintbox art is by the artist employed by Quantel to design the user-friendly UI Paintbox menu and launch it in 1981. Extracted from an original Quantel 8 inch floppy disk, Holbrook described it as being "executed in a matter of 20-25 minutes from scratch, with no reference"

## 09 | Ellen & Lynda Kahn TwinArt

### **Double Date 1984 - 35mm Paintbox output slide**

Ellen and Lynda Kahn AKA TwinArt, were among the first artists to use the Paintbox in 1982. The Emmy Award-winning multi-disciplinary artists have collaborated with Nam June Paik, worked with MTV and their art has been exhibited in The Whitney, The Met, Centre Pompidou and ICA, London.

## 10 | Lea Lubin

### **Untitled 1985 - Video screenshot**

Argentinian-French painter, sculptor and performance artist, whose work is in MoMA and Centre Pompidou. Lea Lublin created these on Paintbox for the '6 Peintres Sur Ordinateur' video, commissioned by the French Ministry of Culture in 1985 and produced at Computer Video Film's studio in Paris.

## 11 | Kim Mannes-Abbott

### **Untitled 1992 - Scan of digital print**

Working with Paintbox since 1984, Mannes-Abbott's iconic work won the ICA New Contemporaries competition with a pioneering series combining Paintbox and mixed media. In 1987, MTV Europe utilised her Paintbox skills to develop the iconic Paintbox graphic language for their European launch. Her work featured on the cover of the Paintboxed! Book in 1994. Mannes -Abbott is a recognised Designer & Artist living and working in Amsterdam.

## 12 | Sydney Nolan

### **A Sculpture for Sydney Harbour 1986 - Medium format Paintbox output slide**

Edited out of the BBC's Painting With Light before this artwork was complete, it was rescued from Quantel's discarded archives and is being shown for the first time. Nolan was at first assisted by Martin Holbrook but produced many pieces himself on the Paintbox, preserved in The Sidney Nolan Trust archive.

## 13 | Stephen Partridge

### **The Sounds of These Words 1990 - Video screenshot**

Renowned video artist Partridge was born in Leicester, Studied at the RCA and established The Television Workshop at Duncan of Jordanstone College with a Paintbox donated by Quantel in 1984. His famous 'Monitor' is in Tate London. From Channel 4's TV 'Interventions' series, this video still shows how Partridge used the Paintbox to interplay the spoken word and animated text.

## 14 | Kiki Picasso

### **Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Winnie Mandela 1984 - 35mm Paintbox output slide**

Kiki Picasso AKA Christian Chapiro embraced the Paintbox possibly more than any other artist, investing in one himself after using one at CVF in Paris. His distinctive style was well-suited to the technology and his work ranged from fine art pieces to music videos for artists such as Boy George.

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## 15 | Larry Rivers

### **Portrait of Green Gartside 1986 - Medium format Paintbox output slide**

Creative polymath, Larry Rivers, spent time becoming familiar with the Paintbox at NBC's studios in New York before flying to Quantel in 1986 to create this digital portrait of Scritti Politti's lead singer, Green Gartside on what he described as a new creative toy that gave him a thrill.

## 16 | John Sanborn & Dean Winkler

### **Renaissance 1984 - Video screenshot**

Sanborn and Winkler are two of the best known digital video art pioneers, with work in MoMA, Centre Pompidou and the Whitney Museum. Commissioned by the Computer Museum in Boston, Renaissance used the Paintbox to transform the skyline of Boston Harbor into a futuristic cityscape.

## 17 | Mechteld Schmidt Feist

### **Mensch + Schmidt Feist, No 88-1 1988 - Video screenshot**

Artist, Animator, long-standing SIGGRAPH NY Board Member and NYU's Professor of Digital Communications & Media for 20 years, Mechteld's experimental Paintbox work, such as this from 1988, was an important part of her incredible digital art career.

## 18 | Hérve Télémaque

### **Untitled 1985 - Video screenshot**

Haitian surrealist painter Hervé Télémaque painted this on Paintbox for the near impossible-to-find, '6 Peintres Sur Ordinateur' video, commissioned by The French Ministry of Culture and created at CV's studio in 1985.

## 19 | Adrian Wilson

### **New Photography 1986 - 35mm Paintbox output slide**

Wilson is considered the first photographer to specialize in the digital manipulation of photographs, using Quantel's paint system. Images we now call 'photoshopped' were originally referred to as 'paintboxed' and in 1986, Wilson recognized that Paintbox heralded the start of a new photography era.

## 20 | Brandon Wisecarver

### **Paintbox Self-Portrait #1 2023 - Paintbox digital output file**

New York based Wisecarver is a cutting-edge VR digital painter, posting his process and final pieces on TikTok. Even though the Paintbox was launched years before he was born, he found the intuitive UI had very familiar features found in current creative beta software menus.

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Supported by The Computer Arts Society. London

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Curated by Adrian Wilson

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For more information: [computer-arts-society.com](http://computer-arts-society.com)

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Designed by Kim Mannes-Abbott

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Produced by Sean Clark