

Computer Arts Society: Radical Past, Radical Future?

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Listen, Scoundrels!” is a Computer Arts Society 20 Print Exhibition curated by Sean Carroll and first shown at BCS Moorgate in London in March 2025 (Carroll, 2025a).



Figure 1. The cover to the “Listen, Scoundrels!” exhibition catalogue (Carroll, 2025a).

The exhibition deals with the early, “radical”, nature of CAS and draws from discussions published in the the early issues of the Society’s PAGE newsletter (Computer Arts Society, 2025).

The exhibition was assebled with the support of contemporary Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools by Sean Carroll (2025b) and focused on five key “Calls to Action” identified within thesource material. These are:

1. Reject institutional apathy.
2. Weaponise art against technology.

3. Reclaim the artist’s power over technology.
4. Break free from the art market system.
5. Create art that intervenes in the world.

To me, the content of the exhibition and these calls to action felt remarkably relevant to the present day, and I wrote a short introductory essay for the exhibition catalogue that highlighted what I felt to be the importance of the work. The entirety of this short essay is reproduced below.

2. AN INTRODUCTION TO “LISTEN, SCOUNDRELS!”

The Computer Arts Society (CAS) was founded in 1969. At the time, the idea of using computers to make art was a radical one—and potentially a conflicted one. After all, the computer was a product of the “military-industrial complex,” and it was by no means certain that the increasing computerisation of society at large would be a positive thing.

Against this backdrop, artists Gustav Metzger and Frieder Nake, along with other CAS members, engaged in a discourse about the future of art and the role of the artist in the rapid development of new technology. This discourse was captured in CAS’s newsletter PAGE, edited by Metzger, and became a significant part of CAS’s focus in the late 1960s and 1970s.

In this exhibition, artist-curator Sean Carroll presents material from CAS’s radical past and distills it into five key “calls to action.” His curatorial process involved the use of contemporary AI tools to help uncover some of the deeper themes and narratives.

What emerges is an extraordinary insight into the thinking of artists who understood that computers would be an integral part of humanity's future but refused to allow their development to proceed blindly, without critique.

What is also immediately apparent is that the arguments made then are as relevant now as ever. Fifty years later, I wonder—have we as artists really learned that much when it comes to the critical adoption of new technologies?

Innovations such as Virtual and Augmented Reality, cryptocurrency/NFTs, Artificial Intelligence, and robotics are often enthusiastically embraced by artists as “the next big thing.” However, the development of these technologies is largely funded by the same “military-industrial complex” described by Metzger and Nake in the 1960s and 1970s—albeit now with the addition of tech billionaires and other like-minded self-interests.

That's not to say that artists should avoid these technologies—quite the opposite. Artists need to explore them in order to fully understand how they work and to convey their benefits, uncover their creative potential, and present risks to others.

I have come to realise that we urgently need to demonstrate the same level of critical thinking now regarding our use of new technologies as the early CAS members, whose ideas are so clearly presented in this exhibition.

It is my hope that the members of the Computer Arts Society take on this challenge and that we continue to provide a home for thought-provoking

radicalism, just as we have in the past. I hope this exhibition inspires you as it has me and encourage you to get in touch with CAS if you would like to contribute to the Computer Arts Society's radical future.

I would like to thank Sean Carroll for producing this excellent and thought-provoking 20 Print Exhibition. Please visit the CAS website for information about our other exhibitions and regular talks.

3. A NEW CALL TO ACTION?

As current chair of the Computer Arts Society I would like to make public my hope that members of CAS reflect on our radical past and consider how we might build a radical future. One that is both aware of the extraordinary creative potential of new technologies, and wary of adopting such technologies without a critical understanding of their origins and potential for misuse.

4. REFERENCES

Carroll, S. (2025a). “Listen, Scoundrels! Calls to Action from Early CAS”. Interact Digital Arts Arts Ltd., Leicester. ISBN 978-1-0685722-1-0.

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