

Fingers on the pulse: digital aesthetics and (not so) dead media

The term digital aesthetics is of fairly recent coinage. It usually refers to the exclusive use of the computer within artistic practice. However the title of this exhibition is suggestive of the role of the digital in pretty well every form of visual art. It was no accident that all the letters of the word typewriter were confined to one line when Christopher Sholes designed the QWERTY keyboard in 1873. This enabled the impressive demonstration of its significant improvements upon earlier models, such as the discrete separation of type into individual characters, which facilitated speed and dexterity. This conceit was also a reflexive gesture. It neatly made the point that any new cultural technology, no matter how different from its predecessors, involves, and indeed necessitates, use of the fingers (the most famous instance of this insight being M.C. Escher's 1948 lithograph, "Drawing Hands"). To exploit the ambivalence contained in the very notion of "digital" aesthetics is therefore no idle caprice, for it identifies an important consideration that must invariably face any contemporary artist: what is to be the role of the computer in an established practice.

All of the artists exhibiting in Qwerty come from an array of low-tech artistic backgrounds, from the fine arts and graphic design, to photography, music and literature. In their own ways they have set about appropriating the inventive potential of the computer. They have also responded to the challenge of modifying their practices in the light of the alchemical processes of computer manipulation and generation. This interplay of tradition and technological innovation in the artistic process is eloquently explored in the works contained here. Viewed collectively, the artists' work in this exhibition offers a fascinating glimpse of emergent practices that exploit the interactions of various modes of production simultaneously at work. The integration of new media technologies into the fertile mix of traditional artistic practices re-energizes the long and respectable tradition of mixed media in the visual arts. This body of work, which is by no means polemical, should

visual arts. This body of work, which is by no means polemical, should counter the cyberphiliac myth that multi-media begins and ends with computer-based art. Here computer-enhanced images are printed as cibachrome photographs, or adhered to silk using nineteenth century development techniques, as in Neil Stanyer's *Screen Version 1.3*, a fractal image skilfully made to resemble organic textures, such as skeins of colour in a fragment of marble. In Maxine Addinsall's *Looking Glass* series the digital image is adhered to traditional materials such as paper, endowing it with the kind of textural finish that pixellation can't accommodate. Photographs are also manipulated electronically to tease out their inherent delicacy as memories of light, as in Gregory Baldwin's mesmeric *The Dreamer*. In terms of immersive space, the grail of cyberculturalists, digital animation is rendered into ambience through the use of video in John Waller's *Blue*, or the gallery itself is transformed into an aleatory, intelligent environment in Rebecca Young and Garth Paine's *Ghost in the Machine*.

QWERTY should also debunk the notion that way-cool information processors have left a trail of dead media in their wake. The stereoscopic slide, a relic from last century, is revived in two works, Alan Dorin's *Mechanical Hermaphrodite* and Martin Walch's *Benchmarking and Translation*. In both cases the use of the stereoscope as a perceptive device is replete with connotations of pre-cinematic peep-shows, *Mechanical Hermaphrodite* in particular highlighting the attraction of looking into strangeness. Walch's work is also an exposition of the serial manner in which images are captured, manipulated and viewed in the age of multiplexing. In the shadow of the auratic glow of the computer screen, the modern descendant of the stereoscope, the humble viewmaster, also brings digitally created images to three-dimensional life without the need of 3-D rendering software in Julie Christie's *Subconscious Reality*.

Blind acquiescence to computer culture holds no truck here. There is a canny irony displayed towards the promises and possibilities of the digital age. Elizabeth Butler's *Lost in Space I & II* and Sandra Taylor's *The Web* confront the implications of being a node in a noosphere of information. Andrew Hurlle's mock Web page in *Meat Tray* also

information. Andrew Hurle's mock Web page in Meat Tray also defamiliarizes the veil of complacency surrounding the Internet, abstracting, rather than reinforcing, the familiarity of the graphic user interface. Richard McLean's Stuff contrives a deliberately anti-computer look, achieving a quirky, "visually minimalistic" interface that mediates his world view for all who wish to go along for the ride.

All artists have to reckon with history. T. S. Eliot's argument that the individual talent has to embrace tradition in order to extend it is as relevant today as it was in 1919. Practitioners who rely in any way upon computerized techniques of compositing, rendering or manipulation are especially required to adopt a rere regardent perspective, since any distinctive aesthetic that will eventually be seen to be unique to the computer will surely develop out of this history. The most fascinating aspect of this collection is the interplay of traditional and new media, and the subtle, often ingenious blurring of their attendant processes of invention and ways of seeing. Mark Lycette's Boxcraft cleverly brings together devices of simple line drawing with the tactile, constructive pleasures of kit-style assemblage. Similarly, John Lycette's Papermachine evidences a fascination with the permeable quality of paper, its ability to retain traces that are barely visible to the eye, but which contain hidden secrets to be unlocked. In this he has deftly clinched the tenor of this recombinant aesthetic, weaving a "common ground" between paperspace and the interactive program. Georgina Duckett also explores the problem of surface and depth in her Blackboard Drawings. This work is a beautifully tactile reminder that the ephemeral nature of the computer screen has a history, and belongs not only in the tradition of the blackboard but also the magic writing slate, the writing surface that appealed so much to Freud and his theory of the psyche. This drama of presence and absence, the interplay between part and whole, and the constant threat of entropy from within, is metaphorically captured in Natasha Dwyer's interactive A Moment in Time: Ruins.

Just as the typewriter extended, rather than replaced the traditional practice of handwriting, the work represented in QWERTY evidences the ways in which artists today are keeping their fingers on the rapidly

the ways in which artists today are keeping their fingers on the rapidly changing morphology of the creative act in the age of new and not so dead media.

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