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Teaching Cyber Art, or how a painter copes with Computers in London

Abstract

Walking back from my painting studio on a summer evening, looking up at the electronic flicker of TVs, I do wonder... how can a painting do anything in a living room? Does the future lie in the hands of the cyber artist? Hold on. I am a painter, and I use computers, and that combination makes a lot of sense, though nowhere in England can you study - or teach - the two together. Computer work is a different kind of art because it's cyber-this or cyber-that? Oh. Even when it's flavor-free? At ISEA 5 in Helsinki I wandered out of the interactive show and got absorbed in the early 20th Century Finnish painting next door, self portraits in log cabins, a solitary fir tree losing its snow. Spring. I resolve to give my work more of a lived-in texture, make it connect with what I saw, give it a temperature, make it more reflective.

Suppose you were just starting out as a student and you wanted to be involved with making art through computers. Since childhood you'd doodled around on an Amiga. making animations. playing games. You'd been told that you had talent for art, and quite naturally you were looking for a course that crossed over between the electronic and the traditional - a bit experimental. But when you looked around the art schools you drew a blank. There simply wasn't a course for you. No-one seemed excited about what a painter could do with this fabulous instrument. You were on your own.

I am in a similar position to that student in that as a painter who uses computers I find I can teach in one or the other department, but never the two together. This has its frustrations. I am not too sure of what actually can be taught in painting on the computer side I am selftaught - and I've never been more than a part-time tutor. But I sense that when you bring these two activities together you raise questions more far-reaching than you ordinarily find in either. It makes no sense to say the combination shouldn't happen. For the first time the painter has available an intelligent instrument beyond the dreams of a Delacroix. Think of all the painting that has grown out of cubist collage, out of Mondrian's modular grids, out of reprocessed photos and what the technique of multiple floaters in say Painter 3 makes possible. Here's a way of thinking that is fast, visual, and direct.

In my experience, however the painting community shrugs it off. I suppose it was difficult for sculptors bred from centuries of carving and modeling to accept machine tools. The difficulty painters have with the technological revolution - how many times have colleagues apologised for their illiteracy with a self-satisfied smile - is that the art of painting has become locked up in technique and dogma. Over the past twenty years we've let ourselves get put into the role of conservatives, always looking-back, even as smart post-modern re-mixers. Progressive, modernist, experimental this is sixties terminology. The limp idea of time-based, issue-based. interactive. multi-media. digital imaging - call it anything - department next door is to keep

experiment out of the way. Painting can then be about paint, flavoured with quotes from the Masters and verbal workshops. The painting staff can think up something really radical, like making the life-model wear a funny hat.

But don't they have a point? Isn't there a real threat to 'fine art' to craft based printmaking for instance from the fast-food techniques of computing? Aren't the implicit values of an art form based on tradition - think of the division in Japanese art education between tradition and western at odds with one that blends into the edutainment industry? Given the delights of interactive TV, or just ordinary TV, what can any artist working in non-interactive still 2-D hope for except to evoke a bygone art form? A pool of silence amidst the babble. Walking back from my painting studio on a summer evening, looking up at the electronic flicker of TVs, I do wonder. How can a painting do anything in a sitting-room? Isn't it naive to imagine that the metaphysics of painting - all that business about representation - send out even the weakest cultural signals?

Does the future then lie in the hands of the cyber artist? The theme park with highbrow VR rides? New Age installations delivered to your sitting room by cable? Artworld CD-Roms with art oriented games? The prototypes exist, and every time I come across them or have a chance to chat with their authors my mind starts spinning.

Artists using computers, the constituency of ISEA - the Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts have their own exhibitions and conferences, and a couple of years ago in Minneapolis one question above all led to howls of protest. Jan Hoet. Director of Documenta and as well placed as anyone to lay down the law. said the accompanying exhibition was... well, crap. Playing around with technology, not touching the soul. The question wasn't is computer work a different kind of art (because it is inter-active. because it's cyber this or that) but whether it was art at all. I had a piece in that exhibition, and I must say I was edging towards the same conclusion. Of course I can run through the counter-arguments: computerwork requires its own critique: artworld gurus feel threatened by new technology: you have to keep an open mind: the work is just interesting and you don't worry about its force as art. All the same here was an issue that wasn't going to go away.

At the last get together in Helsinki, I spent a lot of time at the exhibition. some of the time sitting on a sofa watching myself on the monitor, except that on the monitor there was someone else sitting next to me. someone in fact the other side of town. This was Paul Sermon's piece. Yes, the experience is interesting, but moving? Is it only sentiment. that when I wandered next door and became absorbed in early XXc Finnish painting, self-portraits in log cabins, a solitary fir tree losing its snow - Spring - that made me think that the problem with the computer artist is that he or she leaves little trace of a life that's lived? People don't reflect on themselves. Novels absorb me. Paintings absorb me. Sometimes art through computers absorbs me. Yoshiyuke Abe' s swirls for instance, but too often I'm just registering pseudo art fantasy art, an effect rigged up to pass as 'art' experience,

As a painting tutor I'm expected to discuss and pass comment on the student's efforts, often from the perspective of a TV interviewer obliged to rope in as many issues as possible. I'm more likely to ask what is it about? than how did you do that? It wouldn't be part of the etiquette to bring along my own brushes and with a flourish show the student how it should be done. My expertise, such as it is, has to be taken on trust. As a computing tutor I can show off as much as I like in the demo, and magically unscramble software problems, but I'm not expected to launch into critical monologues peppered with anecdotes about artists I've met. Because I'm perceived as a technician I actually find the students more relaxed and forthcoming than during the head to head ritual of the studio tutorial.

It's occurred to me during interminable crits in a painting studio – tutors doing most of the talking, locking horns sooner or later, the students yawning. Mediocre canvases leaning against the wall – that it's a curious carry-on. When you exhibit paintings in a gallery, you don't get the courtroom scrutiny. Do we make better art by having cast-iron alibis for what we're up to? Personally, I am a believer in luck and trickery, and find that painting is often a battle with conventional wisdom working for the opposition. But I suppose the ritual of the crit plants in the student's unconscious – for good or ill – the idea that what matters is whether your work functions as art. So far, I've never seen the critical screws applied to computer work – except when some less than progressive printmaking staff wanted to prove that inkjets weren't the real thing. From the first computer teaching I did – I was lucky enough to be thrown in at the deep end at the Royal College of Art 5 or 6 years ago, just an hour or two to learn the newly arrived Studio 8 – I realised what a difference a suite of Macs makes to group psychology. Images didn't need to be verbalised or excuses spun out. You tried something out. If it didn't work you threw it away. The novelty of the process was attractive, and most students lost the self-conscious reticence of their studio work. It was playtime.

Could there be here a model for the future? What I have in mind is a college where computers were as much part of a painting department as easels and art magazines, where staff and students just took them for granted. Instead of the crit or the equally crippling fixation on instant fame in the art scene, there would be research projects. Has there ever existed a better way of integrating different disciplines, even simply of connecting painting with photography, animation, textile design? Of course there is resistance, because the structure of an art school is built around the separation of crafts. The less organised computer rooms, where departments mix, tend to be where you get the spontaneity, the improvisation, the invention. When I think of the excitement of discovery, and the willingness to share little parcels of expertise around a computer room I try and imagine what could happen in a good painting school were it to throw away the partitions.

What if you wanted to study 'cyber art' directly without bothering about painting or what happened in the Renaissance? How would you balance the computer side against the art side? I've seen student shows from courses which were so focused on programming that not only did the students appear unaware of the Tate Gallery, but unaware of the availability of Photoshop. They spent months reinventing the paint programmes of ten years ago. And without an aesthetic perspective it was learning to cook without tasting the food. I don't think there's

sufficient depth or quality in computer work to justify it as an autonomous art category. with its own history. My guess is that - as with the history of film - it will blend into existing forms. A broad aesthetic education will be more useful in the long run. The purist argument that computer artists should stick to what is specifically computer generated and couldn't be achieved any other way is neat, but hard to enforce outside of a college. There's no hard line between what depends on an electronic and on a paint medium. A circle is a circle. If I dream about the work I'm doing - as occasionally happens – my own mental processes don't have separate channels for painterly and electronic motifs. The more pervasive the CD-Rom as the home encyclopaedia the less we'll notice how the image is coming to us. It's the quality of the information we'll care about. not the medium. On the other hand the painter attuned to aesthetics will fret over surface quality, the image's texture, its form, its colour. And this does mean slowing down, going against the grain of systems designed to accelerate the flow of information.

One of the commonest responses to computer images is dismay that feelings, emotions, sensuality are excluded. Cyber-art -- if there is such a category - reinforces this perception through chilled-out robots and aluminium surfaces. You could call the morphing blobs and warping magentas the default aesthetic, the swampland of the electronic cliché. However, nowhere in the Mac manual does it say go to cyberworld. The probable look of London in fifty year's time is anyone's guess, but bearing in mind that many of us live in nineteenth century houses, that street plans are known to circumvent Roman amphitheatres, we shouldn't underestimate the imprint of history. the extent to which the past shapes our lives. We are not going to wake up one morning and find the shops have been replaced by video malls. Fantasy visions of a fantasy future are fine. but meanwhile there's plenty to deal with that's on our doorstep.

In the same way that a city back street is a combination of dilapidation and renovation. My hunch is that visual art will persist in its bad habits. Restrictive practices, outsize egos, decaying facades, will always embarrass the flashy new premises. The safest bet is that we'll be dealing with a hybrid culture for quite some time. How do we cope? I think we shouldn't rush to the obvious conclusions. For example, the studio routine of a painter who's geared up to 66mhz and 16 million colours may retrace the steps of earlier generations. Instead of a sketchpad in my pocket I've got my Quicktake digital camera. I've got real brushes. I've got digital brushes. You might object that this is merely simulating painting, but I think this perception comes from a lingering prejudice. Controlling how you process an image can feel as hands-on as drawing with a brush.

It's hard to say why or how the painter needs to touch and feel the surface of an evolving image, but it's a common observation that the hand seems to shape the paint with a will of its own. Herbert Read influenced a generation, and the connections between shaping a pot out of clay and the manipulation of an image in painting extends to the way we can manipulate images electrically. Painters, like writers, have their little routines to get themselves going in the morning, sweeping the floor, tidying the desk, doodling. Doing the crossword, and one of the tricks of the trade is to fool yourself into thinking you are just playing around. Before you know

it you'll find an idea is forming and you're turning it around in your mind to see where it can go. Put simply, whatever the medium, the mental processing has a similar character and fidgeting about on paint programmes carries on a long tradition of creative time-wasting. At the Geometry Centre in the US, where the top brains turn spheres inside out and ponder weird spatial concepts on row upon row of Indy's. There is further evidence of a connection between abstraction and plasticity. Not only were there bare feet, but each geometer had little hexagonal puzzles to fiddle with, to help them assemble their concepts.

What's distinctive about the best computer work that I've seen isn't the technology involved but sometimes simply its tranquility. The artist Delle Maxwell made a beautiful animation of Thurstan's sphere turning inside out. Sometimes there's an infantile quality, candy-colours and perfect forms, a world of make-believe and wish fulfilment: the wandering dolls in Troy Innocent's games and animations: Toshio Iwai's toy-like kinetics - he also works on children's TV in Tokyo: the serenity of Roman Verostko's plotter-drawn wiggles and gold leaf compositions. There's Stellarc, whose stomach sculpture and virtual third arm are not exactly tranquil, so I won't press the generalisation. As with any other kind of art our responses are or are not stirred. often unpredictably. When you are teaching you sometimes feel you are no more than an onlooker, that some students are simply gifted, that whatever they do, on paper, on video, is bound to work out. Your responsibility is to look after the atmosphere, and keep the rest on track.

I've always valued having the freedom to mess around. If you tried to work out the most useful course to suit the student I mentioned at the outset. My hope is that it wouldn't be prescriptive or tied up with cyber-ideology. The biographies of the artists who have gravitated towards ISEA suggest a lot of different paths lead to the same place: Abe was a photographic engineer in Japan, Verostko had a spell as a monk in China. Innocent studied multi-media in Melbourne. and perhaps he represents a new generation specially recruited and fed a diet of Sega.

However, there's an interesting lesson to be learned from the CV's of the pioneers of XXc art. You find clusters who studied law or engineering - clarity and construction are key terms in modernism. For all we know the most appropriate course to sign up for now isn't an art course at all.