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New York Digital Salon  
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## THE DIGITAL BECOMES CONTEMPORARY

We are at a special and paradoxical moment in the development of digital art. Now that it is finally gaining widespread public and critical attention, digital art is also being quickly absorbed into the world of contemporary art. The next generation of artists and critics will not look at making art with a computer as something extraordinary or unusual. This phenomenon is already quite apparent in galleries in New York and abroad. While galleries like Postmasters and Bitforms specialize in new-media art, numerous other galleries in Chelsea exhibit similar work, but do not make the distinction that it is new-media art. Another growing trend in New York is for artists to display prints along with new media as an integral part of the exhibition. The return to the object is due in part to the recent widespread availability of archival printing methods. Museums are also in the process of refitting to accommodate the next wave of contemporary art. The Museum of Modern Art in New York has closed for two years to update its galleries, and the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art in Amsterdam is planning a major renovation for 2004. For those of us who have followed the SIGGRAPH Art Gallery for many years, this acceptance of digital art by the contemporary art world is refreshing, but also raises many questions. Digital art has operated outside the art establishment for many years, and this has allowed it to remain relatively free.

Digital art originated as a product of the creative experiments of artists and engineers in the early days of computing. One of the first techniques, using the ASCII character set to make digital prints, was developed by Ken Knowlton and Leon Harman, two early computer-art pioneers at Bell Labs. In 1966, Billy Kluver, along with Robert Rauschenberg, organized a series of events in New York called Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT), in which artists used technology in their creative practice. Exhibitions in the late 1960s, like *Cybernetic Serendipity* at the ICA in London and *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York held promise for those pioneers who saw the creative potential of computers.

In the early days, mainframe computers were only accessible to engineers, and it was difficult for artists to get access to these machines. During this time, computer art was experiencing the same fate that photography and video art suffered when they first began to develop. There were considerable technical problems, not only from the hardware point of view. The software did not have the sophistication it has today. Archiving was also difficult, because operating systems and software were constantly changing. The real revolution in digital art came in the 1980s, when IBM PCs and Macintosh computers arrived. The development of machines that artists could afford and the creation of paint systems with full color capabilities brought new life to digital art. Artists like Barbara Nessim used output from a Macintosh LaserWriter as foundations for their paintings. Photography was also used to make digital prints. Initially, photos were taken directly off the screen, but later film recorders were developed to get high-resolution photographic images out of the computer. Digital printing methods were still being developed, and archival printing methods have only recently become widespread. In the early 1990s, interactive multimedia and widespread public acceptance of the internet caused the art community, as well as the general public, to focus on net art and interactive installations.

Soon after the all-electronic SIGGRAPH 93 Art Show, the New York Professional Chapter of ACM SIGGRAPH held the first New York Digital Salon at the Art Directors Club. This 50-print exhibition was one of the first digital art exhibitions in New York since the 1960s, and it was favorably received. The New York Digital Salon has since evolved into a venue for international artists that includes all forms of artistic expression created with computers and technology, including prints,

installations, sculpture, disk-based media, animation, digital video, web sites, performances, and music.

The last five years have seen a literal explosion in the presence of digital art in galleries and museums. In 2001, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art exhibited 010101: Art in Technological Times and the Whitney Museum of American Art opened BitStreams and Data Dynamics. The Brooklyn Museum of Art Digital Printmaking exhibition in 2001 traced the history of printmaking, ending with a focus on digital printmaking methods. While the line between digital art and contemporary art is blurring, digital technology has fundamentally changed not only the way art will be created in the future, but also the way it will be perceived, exhibited, and distributed. Technology has blended art and culture worldwide. In the past, schools of art were established by small groups of artists in specific geographic locations. The internet and widespread availability of digital tools have empowered artists everywhere to share their digital work and their ideas about digital art.

The SIGGRAPH 2003 Art Show is returning to its roots with an emphasis on digital prints, sculpture, and the growing impact of digital video and animation. This point of view confirms that we are moving from focusing on the tools to looking through them into the art. While there are still many new technical frontiers to explore with digital art, we are still only at the beginning of an entirely new form of contemporary art. We must remember that its power is based on the art that preceded it, not the technology. The SIGGRAPH 2003 Art Show pays tribute to that history and the future of contemporary art.

Bruce Wands is an artist, writer, and musician. He is also chair of the MFA computer art department and director of computer education at the School of Visual Arts in New York. His department's site ([www.sva.edu/mfacad](http://www.sva.edu/mfacad), was named by Yahoo Internet Life as one of the "100 Best Sites of 2002." for Best Original Web Art. "Time Out New York" named him one of the "99 People to Watch in 1999." His book, *Digital Creativity*, was published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. in 2001, and he is currently writing a book on digital art for Thames & Hudson (UK), to be published in 2004. He was the first musician to perform live over ISDN lines in 1992. He is director of the New York Digital Salon, an international digital art exhibition ([www.NYDigitalSalon.org](http://www.NYDigitalSalon.org)). He has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA UK). He served on the New York City ACM SIGGRAPH Board of Directors for 10 years.