

Post-Industrial Expression



Barbara Nessim, *Hand Memory*, 1987, computer print-out,
30 x 24 inches.

Sordoni Art Gallery
Wilkes College
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POST-INDUSTRIAL EXPRESSION

We seem to be living in an age which can identify itself only in terms of previous ages — “Post-Modern”, Neo-Expressionist, Neo-Romantic, and here, “Post-Industrial.” These encompassing, but often vague rubrics are perhaps symptomatic of a pace of change in our culture which exceeds our ability to define exactly what we are about at any present moment. “Post-Industrial Expression”, the title of this exhibition does have a particular meaning within the context of its source, the 28th annual conference of the Association for General and Liberal Studies, which is meeting this month at Wilkes College. The conference theme, “Liberal Learning in a Post-Industrial Culture,” focuses on the impact of electronic technology and information systems upon the character and philosophy of American education.

The exhibition provides a visual expression of that technology in the field of art and tries to demonstrate something of the variety of ways in which artists have creatively adapted it to their individual expressive ends. One of our specific aims is to show how an originally non-artistic technology can be humanized and aestheticized in the hands of enterprising artists. Another is to point out that these adaptations of current technology are, indeed, the works of artists, not scientists or professional programmers (although some of these artists have become able programmers in the course of their work). The exhibition is very selective because of the modest space and resources at our disposal, and so we have chosen to focus upon two of the most influential technologies in our culture: the computer and the video camera, which in their relatively non-mechanical, electronic, and ephemeral nature can be called “post-industrial.” These devices manipulate information rather than solid materials; they process numbers, language, and images. Thus, it is only logical that they should serve the needs of musicians, poets, and painters as well as statisticians, sociologists, and journalists.

The technical achievements of our civilization have aroused both pride and foreboding. Many a college freshman enters school suffering from “computer anxiety”, while some of his professors envision a society soon to be enslaved by its electronic systems. But, sooner or later, we seem to get our creations under control, and almost any new technology that takes hold, however inimical to aesthetic expression it may seem, eventually presents a challenge and an opportunity to artists. In the 15th century, the printing press threatened to bring an end to the hand-printed manuscript. In fact, over the next two centuries, it virtually did so, and the beautifully painted illuminations of manuscripts were replaced by the crude, mechanical images of printed books. There were, nevertheless, artists such as Durer and Rembrandt who adopted the new technology and raised engraving and etching to a high art. In the 19th century, another technological breakthrough, photography, all but took over the recording function of painting, but painters responded by developing more deeply its expressive and decorative functions.

While not every new technical innovation has such an impact on art, it is clear that some art forms have been decisively altered and others virtually ended by new inventions.

Whether the computer and the video camera will have such an effect is unforeseeable at this comparatively early stage in their development, but there is a growing impression that they will, at least, become permanent alternatives for the artist.



Joan Truckenbrod, *Syllogism*, black and white photograph, 16 x 20 inches.

COMPUTER ART — The computer is capable of literally assisting artists in the development of their ideas and the manipulation of their images. Essentially, it offers the artist two possibilities: a tool for accelerating or simplifying the rendering of a concept, which previously would have been done manually; and a device with inherent aesthetic properties in the way it works and in the nature of the images it produces. It is this latter possibility, primarily, which justifies the term "computer art." Some artists, particularly designers and architects, use the computer mostly as a time-saving tool. The works in this exhibition are by artists with whom the computer "collaborates" to one degree or another in the creative process. The artist locates or designs programs which complement his or her own artistic processes. The operations of a computer, like the unfolding effects of brushstrokes and color being applied to canvas, can help drive the evolution of an artist's idea. This creative interaction of artist and medium is nothing new; the computer merely phrases it in different terms.

A number of artists have come to use the computer as virtually their sole medium, composing on their monitors and producing finished works on their printers and plotters. They would not think of disguising pixels any more than some sculptors would polish down chisel marks. These artistic "hackers" are a minority; most computer artists integrate the technology with more traditional means. Ideas may be developed on the computer but manually produced with paint or

ink, or conversely, freehand images may be fed into the computer for augmentation and reproduction.

Among the artists represented here, *Mark Wilson* is probably the one most devoted to full use of the unique characteristics of the medium. The regular patterns and permutations in serial arrangements, the vivid color schemes, and the shifting perspectives, all mapped out entirely on the monitor and rendered by a plotter, give his work their computeristic, yet elegant appearance. He exploits the machine of our day as the Bauhaus artists exploited the machines of the 1920's.

John Pearson, a professor of art at Oberlin College, has been using the computer since 1973, longer than most of the artists assembled here, and his style, like Wilson's, seems well suited to the medium. His fondness of De Stijl art and his interest in mathematics (e.g., the Golden Section and Fibonacci numbers) could easily have led him to a severely cerebral kind of art, with the computer playing a dominating role. But Pearson has maintained a certain distance from the technology by rendering his paintings and reliefs in the traditional manner. The computer solves complex relationships and suggests new avenues for exploration, but it does not produce the final art object.

Artists working in geometric and serialistic styles may thus find the computer a natural ally, yet feel the need to retain a human touch. *Darcy Gerbarg* and *Harry Holland* preceded their computer works with paintings and prints which explored complex perspectives and spatial relationships. Holland is the acting director of the Art and Technology Center at Carnegie Mellon University. In recent years, he has adopted the computer as both a perspective aid and a formulator of dense structures. Gerbarg, who directs the graduate computer art program at the School of Visual Arts in New York, continues her color and space explorations on the computer, but transfers her results to traditional paint and printmaking media so that the final art object has a more sumptuous physical richness. The large scale of much of her work expands the typically miniaturistic quality of computer images into the realm of the environmental, especially in her murals.

Computer art is by no means dominated by geometric styles, however. *Barbara Nessim*, who also teaches at the School of Visual Arts, enters hand-drawn representational images into the computer by way of a digitized pad, after which they can be processed in a variety of ways. Nessim compares the artist's computer with the writer's word processor; where the writer moves words, the artist moves images. An image can be worked on and altered, but the original stored in the memory can be brought back whenever the artist wants it. Although the technology, in this case, is little more than a mute tool, it does offer the artist an incentive to experiment more freely.

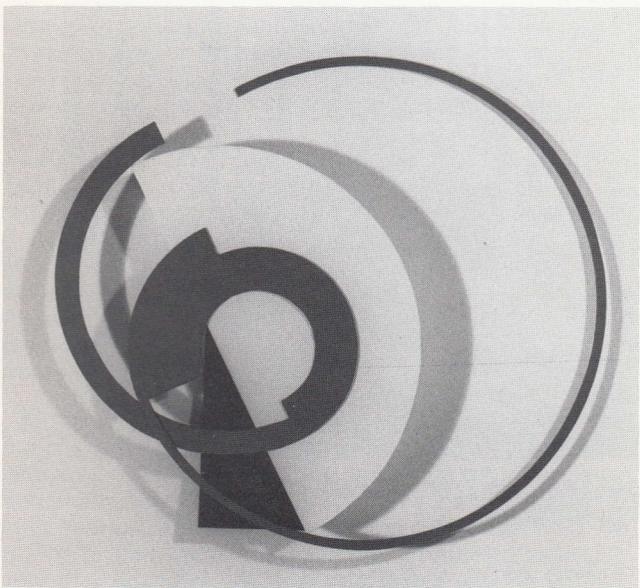
Isaac Victor Kerlow, director of the Computer Graphics Programs at Pratt Institute, has found the media of printmaking and computerization to be unusually compatible. Both can create multiple impressions and both may use composite matrices — superimposed plates in printmaking, integrated numerical plots in a computer. Kerlow begins with a hand-drawn sketch which he then develops on the computer. The resulting image is transferred to the printmaker's plate

either photographically or by direct inscribing with a plotter. In either case, the image is enriched in the final printing through the inherent properties of the printmaker's ink and papers. Kerlow's blend of old and new technologies is expressively paralleled in his frequent combination of archaic and modern imagery.

The capability of the computer to call up images from its memory in any order and in many permutations encourages artists to exploit the old surrealist device of juxtaposition. *Bill Davison*, a widely exhibited artist from Vermont, juxtaposes illusion (in the form of photographic images) with "anti-illusionistic areas of senuous and physical presence" in order to "establish a 'field' that reveals choices and ambiguities, a double dialogue that compares both media and their contents." *Joan Truckenbrod* also uses the computer to process photographic information in a highly personal way. The images from a video camera are fed into the computer by a video digitizer. Using both commercial software and her own programs, she then interweaves the recorded material into a composite photographic image which she shoots directly off the monitor screen with a 35mm camera.

Truckenbrod's medium is well suited to her expressive concerns. A faculty member at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she has stated that her work "confronts the fragmentary effects of the differing roles we all assume in our lives — as parents, siblings, lovers, spouses, workers, etc. . . . The interacting roles of figures, masks and screens in my images represent different roles and their undulating positions in our lives . . . Images can be layered and synthesized in a manner that parallels the fabric of contemporary life."

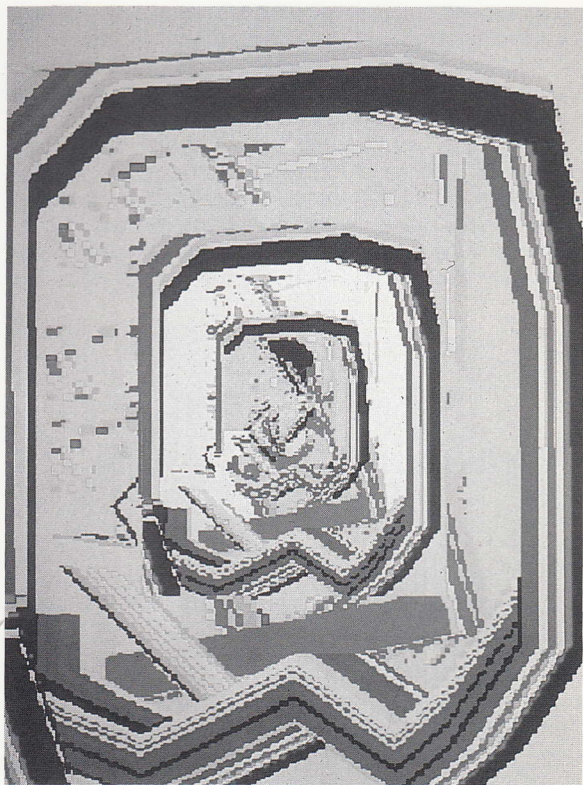
Something of the same composite effect is achieved by *Charlotte Brown*, but in a style that is predominantly abstract,



John Pearson, *Fresnel Proposal #38*, 1986, Acrylic on rag board, 22 x 22 x 3 inches.

yet not geometric. She combines fragments of patterns which are either transcribed to a single surface or pieced together as collages. Her motifs suggest distant or exotic places, times, and styles. Brown was originally an abstract expressionist painter, but turned to the 3M color processor after an auto accident left her unable to work with a brush. Yet her work reveals that her new medium is more than a simple tool to execute ideas that she might have previously painted or assembled. The computer has opened new terrain for her to explore just as it has for the other artists in this exhibition. Once more, the interaction of artist and medium becomes part of the creative process.

It is clear from the work of these nine artists that computer art is already highly diverse in style and highly flexible in technique. It may look as geometric as Pearson's, as organic as Brown's, or as illusionistic as Truckenbrod's. It may be as densely computerized as Wilson's or as richly handmade as Gerbarg's. The "gee whiz" phase of computer image-making — those digital Mona Lisas, for example — is long gone for the serious artist.



Darcy Gerbarg, *Q Space*, 1983, serigraph,
49 x 40 inches.

VIDEO ART — Video, as a medium, seems less radical than the computer, for it is an extension of an already accepted art form, film. What sets it apart is its accessibility to

both artist and viewer. Compared to film, video is cheap, quick, and spontaneous. It is within the means and capability of a vast number of people. It can even free the frustrated or latent imaginations of thousands of persons who lack traditional "talent." The video artists represented in this exhibition approach their medium in two distinct ways: as linear "documentation" (i.e. a straight narrative flow); and as montage (i.e. the juxtaposition or superimposition of fragments). In every case, they provide, like the underground film movement, an antidote to any potential "tyranny by television."

John Will, a painter and printmaker teaching at the University of Calgary, is the documentarist of the group, but it is only in style that his pieces are documentaries. Will is a parodist who observes with dead aim and deadpan humor the follies and fantasies of contemporary society. The title subject of his *An Albuquerque Car* is a true relic of the industrial age examined by a post-industrial artist. *Jumpin' Jesus* is an amusing footnote to one of television's blockbusters, the Winter Olympics (made in collaboration with Gordon Trick).

Satire and social commentary of a more aggressive sort are found in the movement known as Scratch Video. Clips from commercial videotapes are assembled into a montage which resembles rapid channel switching but which replaces randomness with deliberate juxtaposition. Two basic types of theme are preferred: the political and social satire; and the deconstructive commentary on the medium itself and our sense of artistic structure. The pieces shown here as *The Greatest Hits of Scratch Video*, and never more than a few minutes in length, represent the work of a group of British video artists: *George Barber* (who produced the tape), *John Maybury*, *Jeffrey Hinton*, the *Duvet Brothers*, *Kim Flitcroft* and *Sandra Goldbacher*, and *John Scarlett Davis*. Barber notes that Scratch is often edited in "advertising time" rather than "art time," with rapid-fire, rap-style images assaulting the viewer. Like collage, Scratch trades in "found materials." One Scratch artist has said, "Why film when you can get it off TV? Those guys (TV cameramen) can be relied upon to get it in focus, nicely framed — we simply show them where they went wrong."

Connie Coleman, a video and computer artist from Philadelphia, also uses juxtaposed fragments to undermine our complacencies and assumptions. Her *Ballet Digitale* is a kind of post-industrial *Ballet Mechanique*, Fernand Leger's classic 1924 avantgarde film which captured the syncopations of an industrial world in the then new montage style. Coleman's piece is, thus, "post-industrial" in both theme and medium, and a fitting climax to our brief survey of post-industrial expression.

All the artists in this show can be considered pioneers (several of them have even written books and articles on their techniques). Computer art and video art are still young, even though they have been around for more than two decades. John Pearson has worked with computers since 1973, yet now he is often working without them, returning instead to wholly traditional methods. Does this mean he has exhausted their potential, grown tired of them, or set himself new goals? Pearson speaks of his "love/hate relationship"

with the computer: his respect for its ability to reveal new paths to pursue, but his mistrust of its allure; his delight in the time it saves, but his frustration in one's inability to absorb the overload it produces (thus canceling out the saved time). Ultimately, for him, the computer is but a tool of logic, recalling sculptor Sol Lewitt's remark that "art jumps to conclusions that logic cannot reach." Jumps of imagination, leaps of faith, flights of fancy — these have always been the way of art. It is really a question of the relationship between artist and medium: which is master and which is servant?

The computer and the video camera are unquestionably versatile artistic media, accessible to any artist who wishes to learn a new technique and to any person for whom these media may open the door to artistic expression. It is impossible to predict how widely and deeply they will penetrate the artistic world. Undoubtedly, many artists will continue to get along nicely without "state of the technology" art. Yet, even this modest exhibition reveals something of the great potential of these art forms in the hands of resourceful artists. Bronze-casting, invented sometime in the fifth millennium B.C., was technically much more complex than stonecarving, yet both media still flourish today. Computers and video will probably likewise extend the technical options available to artists without making older techniques obsolete. In the final analysis, the deeper meaning and beauty of art lie in the human thought and feeling which the artist shapes into form. The means may change, but the ends rarely do.

William Sterling
Associate Professor of Art

Artists Represented:

George Barber
Charlotte Brown
Connie Coleman
Bill Davison
Duvet Brothers
John Scarlett Davis
Kim Flitcroft
Darcy Gerbarg
Sandra Golbacher
Jeffrey Hinton
Harry Holland
Isaac Victor Kerlow
John Maybury
Barbara Nessim
John Pearson
Joan Truckenbrod
John Will
Mark Wilson

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