

# Rewriting Contemporary Art History

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## Abstract

This paper will briefly trace the early history of digital art and provide an overview of how it is taking its rightful place in international contemporary art history. The history of digital art goes back well over forty years with the creative experimentation of artists at research centers, such as Bell Labs and MIT. Access to early computer graphics systems was difficult and often required collaborations between artists and computer scientists. While there were a few seminal exhibitions in the 1960's, digital art experienced the first logarithmic growth period during the 1980s, when personal computers became widespread and available to artists. The establishment of organizations such as SIGGRAPH and Ars Electronica in the 1970s nurtured the creative use of computers and technology through annual exhibitions, conferences and publications. The second major growth period of digital art began in the mid-1990s with the emergence of the World Wide Web. Artists now had access to a global community to exhibit and discuss their work. Since the mid-1990s, museums and galleries have become increasingly receptive to digital art. A new generation of artists is emerging, one that has never known a world without computers and sees making art with technology as a normal part of the creative process. It is this new generation that will integrate digital art with contemporary art.

## Early digital art history

Early computer art venues included the 1965 exhibitions of Frieder Nake, Georg Nees and A. Michael Noll at the Studio Gallery of the Technische Hochschule in Stuttgart, Germany and the *World Exhibition of Computer Graphics* at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York, which included A. Michael Noll and Bela Julesz. In 1966, Billy Kluver, Robert Rauschenberg, Fred Waldhauer, and Robert Whitman established "Experiments in Art and Technology" (EAT), an organization designed to bring artists and engineers together. "9 Evenings of Theater and Engineering" was held at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York and brought together over 30 artists and engineers in a

creative collaboration. Two major seminal exhibitions: "Cybernetic Serendipity: The Computer and the Arts" at the ICA in London curated by Jasia Reinhart and "The Machine As Seen At the End of the Mechanical Age" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, both in 1968, stand out as landmarks in digital art history.

## Digital art organizations

Rather than fitting into the mainstream, digital art has been nurtured by international organizations through conferences, exhibitions, and publications. The journal "Leonardo", started in 1968 by Frank J. Malina, has provided an ongoing forum for digital art theory, history, practice, and the relationship and interaction between art, science and technology. The British Computer Art Society was founded in 1968 to promote the creative use of computers. The 1980s saw the establishment of the V2\_: Institute for the Unstable Media (1981) and Ars Electronica (1987), followed by ISEA (1990), Canon ArtLab (1991), New York Digital Salon (1993) and Rhizome (1999). What these organizations, and many other newly established ones, have done is to fill the vacuum created by traditional museums and galleries that had not yet embraced this art form. Through their exhibitions, they are creating a living history of digital art that is accessible to artists, art historians, curators and the general public. In some ways, this "ghettoization" of digital art into highly focused groups has propelled its development. Along with this ongoing development, we are seeing archives being established for new media art through organizations like the Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art at Cornell University, DOCAM (Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage) established in 2005 by the Daniel Langlois Foundation in Canada, the Database of Virtual Art, Whitney Artport and Rhizome, among others. The question then arises as to how this will evolve in the future. If these international organizations are providing for the archiving of digital art, how will they interact with and influence the collections of major museums and public institutions? One of the reasons digital art has not been assimilated into museums is the challenge that exhibiting, preserving and maintaining this type

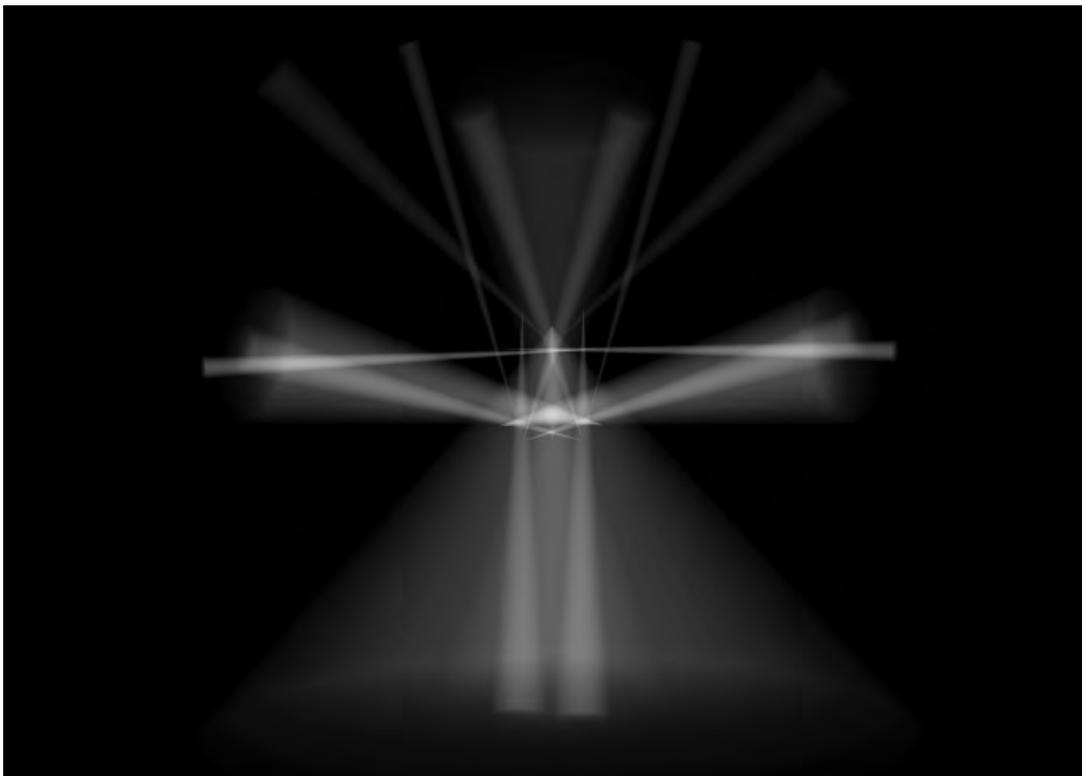


Figure 1: Bruce Wands, Buddha Light Painting 061507, 2007, digital print, 30 x 40 inches

of work presents. One current response is the Variable Media Network, a collaboration between several arts organizations, including the Guggenheim Museum, Franklin Furnace, Rhizome, Walker Art Center and the Daniel Langlois Foundation. This project pairs artists with museum and media consultants to explore ways of preserving art created with new and ephemeral media. As we move forward, hopefully, museums and public institutions will begin to add these works to their collections, as well as incorporate them into their exhibition programming. One interesting example was the “*Visual Music: 1905 — 2005*” exhibition at the Smithsonian Hirshhorn Museum in 2005. This exhibition traced the history of visual music up to the present day, and included computer animation by Larry Cuba along with analog and digital computer animation by James and John Whitney.

There were only a handful of books published on digital art between the 1960s and 1990s. In 1971, Herbert Franke wrote *Computer Graphics — Computer Art*. Other books include Ruth Leavitt’s *Artist and Computer* in 1976, Cynthia Goodman’s *Digital Visions* in 1988 and Frank Popper’s *Art of the Electronic Age* in 1993. Recently, publishers, such as the Leonardo Book Series with the MIT Press and Thames & Hudson, have begun to produce numerous books on digital art. As more books are published, the foundation for the history of digital art is being laid.

In contrast to physical publications, the Internet contains vastly more information on digital art, from the actual work itself, to archives, online magazines, discussion groups, critical essays, etc. The volume of information

on digital art that is online dwarfs what has been printed. Is this the wave of the future? Are more and more publications needed, if the information is readily available online? While these recent developments are welcome, there still exists a vacuum of documentation and information about the relationship of digital art to contemporary art history since 1960. This is one niche that books can fill, as well as the development of websites that focus on the history of digital art, such as the CACHE Project in the UK and the Digital Art Museum in Berlin. A clear unbroken line needs to be drawn that traces the history of digital art and the artists, curators and writers who helped to create it. We now have a generation of artists who have grown up in the digital age and do not see making art with technology as unusual. However, significant historical and research tools for these artists have only appeared in the last decade.

## Conclusion

Given the increasing use of computers and technology to create, exhibit and document digital art, the future looks bright. A new generation of artists has adopted digital tools as part of their creative palette and the mainstream art community and media are seeing this as a natural progression. Where the gap lies is in the proper documentation, preservation and contextualization of early digital art. While this is happening online and in publications, it is hoped that future editions of established art history survey texts will include digital art pioneers, allowing them to take their place in contemporary art history.



Figure 2: Jeremy Gardiner, *Purbeck Light Years*, 2003, Immersive virtual environment with large-scale projections