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The CAT Project as an Historical and Archival Collaboration

The Computer Art and Technocultures Project is a resource enhancement project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, running jointly between the Department of History of Art and Screen Media at Birkbeck College and the Word and Image Department at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Our initial brief was to catalogue, digitise and explore the Patric Prince archive of computer art and related documents, with a remit to investigate the major exponents of computer art from 1975 to 2000 and better understand the evolution of this new field of art. A more pragmatic aim was to undertake the preservation of a new media archive, albeit one that was mainly paper-based, at a major museum and use it as a test-case for future acquisitions in this area.

Both Birkbeck and the V&A had previously worked together to accession the archive of the Computer Arts Society that covered the pioneering period in computer art, from around 1960 to 1980. This was an outcome from the previous CACHe Project that had run at the Department of History of Art from 2002 to 2006, under the auspices of Charlie Gere with Paul Brown, myself and Catherine Mason. CACHe successfully identified and reconnected with an almost-forgotten stratum of British post-war art that worked with cybernetic concepts, systems art and early computers, as documented in the project book White Heat, Cold Logic: British Computer Art 1960-1980.

Such was the interest generated by this project that Douglas Dodds, Head of Central Services at the Word and Image Department in the V&A, was able to convince the museum to acquire the Computer Arts Society collection in late 2005. This served as the basis for negotiations with Patric Prince, a Los Angeles-based art historian long associated with the SIGGRAPH Art Show and the Californian computer arts scene in general. In 2006 her archive was donated to the V&A via the American Friends of the V&A, and shipped to the UK. This formed the basis for our grant application to the AHRC and the subsequent development of our project. The grant was jointly written by Dodds, myself and Professor Jeremy Gardiner who became our Senior Research Fellow. Subsequently Honor Beddard became Computer Art Project Curator

and Francesca Franco joined us as Research Fellow. Between us, our interests span the archival, the curatorial, the preservation of digital archives, the emergence of specific types of digital art on America's West and East coasts during the 1980s, and the representation of digital art at the Venice Biennale.

My particular interest in the Patric Prince archive is historical and aesthetic: to what extent can computer art be said to develop distinct styles and approaches over time, and is it mainly in response to the technological development or other cultural factors? Building on my experience with CACHe, I was interested to see how far the American and international artists represented in Prince's archive followed similar lines of development. The key factor about the archive, to my mind, is that it covers the decade from around 1977 through 1987 when computer imagery went from being a specialist, even scientific, pursuit to a widely-used tool accessible to anyone with a reasonably powerful desktop computer. The phrase "computer graphics" entered common parlance and also became part of Western visual culture, to the extent that films and TV programs seeking a "futuristic" gloss included green-lined vector graphics as part of their aesthetic. Meanwhile, entire industries from publishing to video production shifted wholesale to computer technologies, irrevocably altering our relationship with the image.

Ever since reading James Elkins' book The Domain of Images, I have been as interested in the non-art aspects of general visual culture as the art-specific ones, especially in relation to digital imagery. It is obvious from the history documented in the Patric Prince collection that as the technologies of digital image-making were developed from the mid-1970s onwards, artists informed the process in a number of ways. Firstly as a result of being employed by the companies developing these tools in a purely scientific capacity; secondly through being artists in residence; and thirdly as expert users feeding back their comments and requests to the development community. For instance, the team at New York Institute of Technology, including luminaries such as Dick Shoup and Ed Emshwiller of Sunstone fame, informed the basic techniques used by all subsequent image editing and animation packages. In a different way David Em, as artist-in-residence at NASA JPL's graphics laboratory, showed the technicians wholly new ways to use their software as he used it for artistic purposes. Other digital artists went to work for the first computer graphics and special effects companies in the early 1980s.

The great strength of the Patric Prince archive is its assemblage of catalogues, letters, interviews and ephemera that Prince gathered as she acquired the main body of artworks. This is a cultural cross-section of some importance, dealing with both the USA and the international context of computer art and its surrounding visual culture. Examining the artistic use of computers in this formative period can answer some questions about the fascination of screen-based images. Additionally, the acquisition of this material demonstrates that major cultural institutions are now ready to take on historical new media archives and study them in context, which makes an interesting case study in itself.