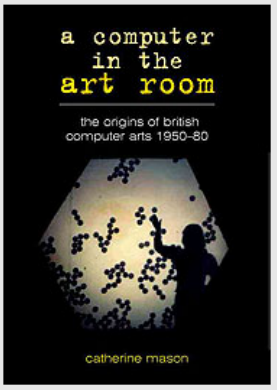
BOOK: A Computer in the Art Room by Catherine Mason, Reviewed by Molly Hankwitz

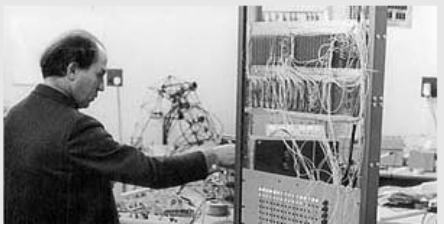
A Computer in the Art Room: The Origins of British Computer Arts: 1950-80
by Catherine Mason, Norfolk: JJG Publishing, 2008.

Reviewed by Molly Hankwitz



This book is a work of art history analyzing the many contributions made by British artists and scientists to the development of computer art in England and its simultaneous impact and origins internationally. Special attention is paid to the development of new arts curriculum and education for artists during the post-war period. Art is a political battlefield when it comes to how and what is taught. Remarkably the arrival of the personal computer and networked computing as well as associated equipment: plotters, printers, and the monitor – began having an impact on artists in the 1950s when it was perceived to be an instrument through which one could express oneself. With many color plates and a fine art approach to the research, Catherine Mason has drawn together a unique collection of some of the most well known British art groups and institutions to have influence upon cultural acceptance and arts education.

The relationship between The Independent Group and the Institute of Contemporary Art's (ICA) forms the basis of much of the analysis, as the ICA was a meeting ground and support for the minds of the Independent Group. Lesser known, but keenly important artists such as Edward Ihnatowicz are written about in great detail, as well as their original works, the Senster, for example, and reactions to it, are described in great detail. Thus the text is a compelling portrayal of how important artists worked against the grain of longstanding, traditional arts education in the United Kingdom's college degree system in order to push for new approaches and ideas. Cybernetics, computer science, robotics, telemetry, as well as 'interactivity', 'participatory' and 'process-driven' art forms are shown to be the intellectual mainstays of avant-garde ideas at the time and are discussed in depth. Great attention is placed upon the overlaps between college arts education, vocational education in polytechnics, 'think tanks', fine art departments and the forces shaping government support and reports upon them.



Edward Ihnatowicz working on his computer-controlled sculpture, The Senster, at University College, London c. 1970

Curiously, because fine arts schools such as the prestigious and elitist Royal College of Art were generally the last to accept any cross over between art and technology, while the polytechnics, largely focused upon vocational training and design, more readily hired artists to work in them. Hence, newer ideas were sometimes tested outside of London. Experimental exhibitions, however, generally pushed computer arts into the realm of the visible for the general public.Richard Hamiltons 'Growth and Form' and 'Man, Motion and Machine' as well as the Independent Groups 'This is Tomorrow', 'Cybernetic Serendipity' (1968) and numersos others, are discussed by Mason as having huge influence upon the critical art audience and in helping to publicize and lend authority to ideas. Mason cross references her research between the inventions of one artist and the influence had on others. Stephen Willats, Roy Ascot, IIhnatowicz, Lawrence Alloway, Lynda Brockbank, Noel Forster, Brian Eno (a student at Ipswich College), and especially Gustav Metzger, Victor Pasmore, Richard Hamilton, Storm Cornock and others are discussed. Thus, the rise of less restrictive and more experimental and process-oriented sensibilities — in contrast to the traditional methods brought about by allegiance to John Ruskin and William Morris– began to appear in fine arts programs throughout England from the early sixties onwards. Roy Ascott's revolutionary 'Groundwork' foundation course introducted to Ealing and Ipswich colleges was had controversial influence.

The legendary Slade School of Fine Art Experimental Department (University College London) was among the first inter-disciplinary programs to prosper around the teaching of computer art. Because the introduction of computer technology to creative work usually centered around design applications, it was less common and understood in fine art programs of the time. The Slade deparment was experimental, but also highly successful. Hamilton, Eduardo Paolozzi, and William Turnbull as well as other members of the Independent Group had attended Slade in the 1940s and their reputations helped its experimental growth as an institution. From William Coldstream's influence onward and including the appointment of Rudolf Wittkower and others into the faculty presents a curious case of collaboration between fine artists, arts councils, funders, and faculty. Moreover, the department developed when "it was clear that art was evolving alongside the social and political changes of the 1960s" (2008, 174) In 1969, Bernard Cohen, in particular, pushed for study in art and electronics and in 1970 the influential Computer Arts Society held 'An Evening of Computer Art and Composition.' (ibid, 175) which consisted mostly of performance based works of computer poetry, light/sound performance by John Lifton, choreographed 'dance' routines by computers by John Landsdown, and so forth. (ibid, 175). In 1970, Systems Group founder, Malcom Hughes created the first computer curriculum for Slade. His own work was influenced by the process-driven epistemology of Pasmore and used mathematical and generative concepts. Works cited from Slade's department are drawings and machines of Stephen Scrivener, CAD drawings of Chris Briscoe created on the CRT at the Slade studio and many others. In 1977 Slade owned a 'technology lab'consisting of a customized computer stacked with a teletype used for alpha-numeric input and output, a storage oscilloscope used for graphic output and the plotter built by Briscoe. (ibid, 181)

The apparent, driving force of Mason's book is her interest in bringing to light the contributions of major players and thinkers, who along with like minded British scientists, engineers, funders and officials – at times influenced by work in the United States or Germany – were attempting to forge especially creative links between art, science and technology. Mason directs the reader to a wealth of information and background as to the role computers played in artmaking during the post-war period, including attitudes towards culture and machines, publications on similar ideas, as well as disparate strands of thought considered in regards to their use. The author manages an articulate history of art and education as well as offering substantial insight into how the role of the artist was in the midst of changing as a result of increasingly global, computerized culture. She shows how this extraordinarly early experimental work was often funded through collaboration with IBMs European offices, via appeals to international exhibitions, and was presented to the public at large. The book is a set of rarely published facts and ideas collected into one text; a vision, especially, of how British arts education was underpinned by various tensions and forces in the arts, and how these tensions had historic foundations. That a post-modern sensibility towards networks and machines was emerging is an understatement, yet the relationship of art, science and technology went back at least to Prince Albert's designs for Albertopolis which combined arts and science museums along one ring road. The British Science museum as well as the V&A are residuals of his utopia.

Many of the ideas conceived during the decades of the sixties and seventies as a response to reactionary concepts – ideas of interactivity

and connectivity, for example – are peculiarly visionary when laid aside theory and use of networked art today. Information and art, art and machines, have become increasingly indistinguishable and, indeed, perhaps overly alike. The book is very informative for those interested in the emergence of electronic media art in Great Britain and relationships between British art and its influence.

–

Mason, C. A Computer in the Art Room. Norfolk, 2008.
for more information: catherine.mason@dsl.pipex.com

This entry was posted on Tuesday, May 12th, 2009 at 8:35 pm and is filed under Books, Contributed Texts, Contributor: Molly Hankwitz, History, Resource, [3]texts & Interviews.