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A Computer in the Art Room: The Origins of British Computer Arts 1950-1980

By Rob Myers - 05/01/2011



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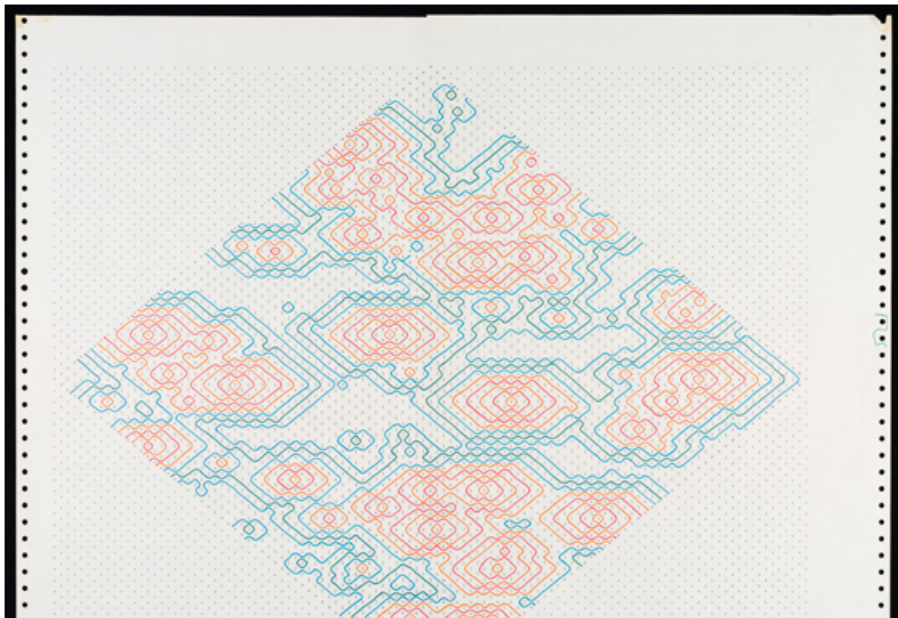
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A Computer in the Art Room: The Origins of British Computer Arts 1950-1980
 Catherine Mason
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Computing anywhere else but its history often seems like a carefully guarded secret. This has been alleviated by activity around the resurrected Computer Arts Society in the 2000s, notably the acquisition of CAS's archives by the V&A and the CaCHE project at

Birbeck College which ran from 2002-2005. CaCHE, run by Paul Brown, Charlie Gere, Nick Lambert and Catherine Mason, produced conferences, exhibitions, and publications including the book "A Computer In the Art Room", by Mason.

The art room of the title is the art department of British educational institutions prior to art becoming a degree-level subject. From the 1950s to the 1970s, when the cost of computing machinery dropped from the level where only major government and corporate organizations could afford them to the level where you only needed a second mortgage to afford one, the best way for artists to get access to the enabling technology of computing machinery was usually in an educational institution.



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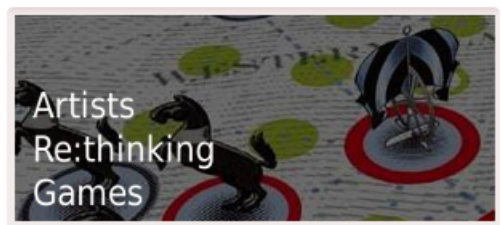
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Mason starts out by describing the artistic and art educational situation in the UK at the time of the Festival Of Britain and the foundation of the ICA in London in the early 1950s. She then explains the structure and significance of the emergence of Basic Design teaching, the impact of the Coldstream report on art education, and the rise of the polytechnic colleges over the next thirty years. This provides vital context for the emergence of art computing teaching in the UK. It is also of more general interest for British art history. Conceptualism, performance, Land Art, the Hornsey Art School occupation, and the educational and media graphics that are currently being used as the basis of "hauntological" art all share this background and can better be understood and critiqued with better knowledge of it.

Basic Design courses started in London but didn't remain there for long. They spread and matured throughout the UK, becoming entangled with the earliest teaching of art computing in provincial technical colleges. Mason traces the family trees of art computing teaching over time through these institutions and back to London-based institutions. Some of the names are familiar from art history (Richard Hamilton, Stephen Willats), some from art computing history (Harold Cohen, John Latham). Where the people involved cross over with cybernetic art, Conceptualism or other artistic currents Mason shows how their ideas fed into and from their art computing work.

The conceptual content of art computing followed the Bauhaus, cybernetics, systems, sociological and environmental influences on art from the 1950s to the 1970s. Its technological forms likewise followed those of mainstream computing. In the 1960s time was leased on mainframes or computers were built by hand. In the 1970s, minicomputers became available and art domain-specific software frameworks or programming languages were written by their users. In the 1980s, workstations with touch tablets, framebuffer, and increasingly proprietary software brought previously unprecedented power and ease of use at the cost of more fixed forms.

The history that I had to piece together as a student from hearsay and from hints in old publications, of the Picaso graphics language at Middlesex University that I found a print-out of the manual for when I was there in the 1990s, of Art & Language's use of mainframe computers, of early cross-overs between art computing and dance, of cybernetic systems and games that attracted mass audiences before disappearing, is detailed, illustrated and contextualized in page after page of descriptions of hardware, software, institutions, courses and projects. The detail would be overwhelming were it not for Mason's ability to bring the human and broader cultural aspect of it all to life.

There's Jasja Reichardt's Cybernetic Serendipity show at the ICA, Andy Inakhowitz's Senster robot, John Latham's dance notation experiments, The Environment Game, and computer graphics drawn with the languages and environments developed in UK art institutions. There's pictures of the computer systems at the Slade, the RCA, Wimbledon and other art schools that serve as insights into the artists' studios. There's the Computer Arts Society, IRAT, APG. And, crucially, there's the links between them told in a narrative that is coherent while still presenting the breaks and false starts in the story.

The history of "A Computer In The Art Room" reads all too often as brief moments of individuals triumphing against the odds to produce key works of art computing then fading into obscurity, academia or commerce. But any art history that considers a specific context at such a level of detail will look like this. Mason describes works, institutions and artists that deserve broader recognition, although she is under no illusion about how far the road to that recognition may be, citing the example of how long it has taken for photography to be recognized as art in the culturally conservative UK.

The social and pedagogical changes of the period covered by "A Computer In The Art Room" reflect a time of hope and ambition for education in society that made the academy less remote. Mason provides the social, technological and educational context needed to appreciate the very real achievements of art computing that she describes against this backdrop. As a slice of art history this is richly detailed. It touches on subjects far beyond art computing that will help any art student of history better understand the period covered. And it is both a relief and an inspiration to finally have a public record of this important aspect of the history of art computing in the UK.

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