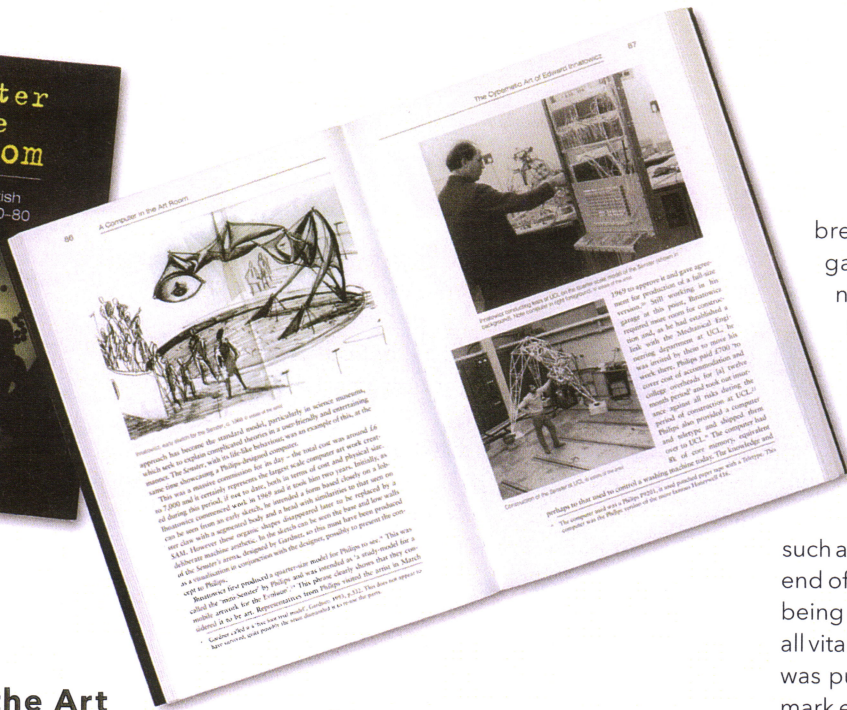## Catherine Mason
A Computer in the Art Room: The Origins of British Computer Arts 1950–80
JJG Publishing, 2008, £25

At the 2003 annual conference of the Association of Art Historians in London, art and technology theorist Dr Charlie Gere presided over a strand dedicated to the relationship between art and modern techno-logies. Its location in a somewhat elusive room that was literally miles away from most of the conference led Gere to describe the small, remote space overspilling with people as a 'ghetto'. Thankfully, Catherine Mason's new book is a valuable indication that things are changing.

The book assembles a remarkable collection of images and data to support a narrative of the growth of computer arts in the UK. Computer arts – broadly speaking the field of experimental computer use in arts practice – is a much-maligned area, and this book is important for two key reasons. One is that few art enthusiasts realise the extent to which computers have been a successful part of art production for over 50 years. The other is that British artists were (and still are) at the forefront of this arena (now better known as New Media art).

By weaving together an account of the socio-political context with information drawn from the first-hand testimony of pioneering computer arts figures, including Roy Ascott, Edward Ihnatowicz and Clive Richards, Mason clearly shows how computers have risen through the art educational system. The artistry of code-writing, the educational mix of poly-technics, and innovative exhibitions such as *Cybernetic Serendipity*, held at the ICA in London in 1968, are given their rightful places in the history of art, while light is shed on the multifarious factors that have influenced practitioners along the way. In this way, this book begins effectively to desegregate art and modern standards of technicity, making 'computer arts' a less oxymoronic term than it once was. In fact, the only real downside to this publication is that it makes a lack of comparable studies all the more lamentable.

Today one might be forgiven for thinking that art history offers few surprises, the same topics getting endlessly rehashed, yet this book – a must if you don't know the field – is strong proof otherwise.

Charlotte Frost is a New Media art writer and the co-ordinator of a-n Collections.

Sarah Thornton
Seven Days In The Art World
Granta, 2008, £15.99

Sarah Thornton devotes each of her seven chapters (days) to a different aspect of the contemporary art world. The first day is spent at one of the big New York art sales, which became headline news in the last decade, as punters gambled telephone number sums in the ever more voracious contemporary art market. She jumps in at a very particular point in art history, weeks after Damien Hirst's record-breaking *Pharmacy* auction changed the game for contemporary artists. In one night of bidding as competition sport, he raised the alluring prospect that instead of losing up to half the dosh to their dealers, artists could take their work direct to the market. The fires of that market are stoked by the areas she investigates on other days. Art criticism, art magazines, art fairs and big prizes such as the Turner (Mark Titchner tells her at the end of the ceremony that not winning 'was like being dumped by your girlfriend in public') are all vital cogs in the publicity machine. The book was published within weeks of another landmark event, when Hirst trashed his own record with his £111 million Sotheby's *Golden Calf* auction. And then that whole surreal world, of bonuses the size of small countries' economies, of debt as wealth, golden handcuffs and hedge funds, began to fall apart.

Thornton doesn't always let the reader forget that this is essentially an academic treatise, despite her punctilious explanation 'in the interests of narrative flow I sometimes found it necessary to practice what I call "displaced nonfiction" in which a quote completed in a phone call is situated "on location" in a real art world scene'. However, the book is fascinating, not least because while she was researching and writing, it must have seemed like an insider's view of a world that would last forever. The book may now stand as its memorial. She quotes Turner Prize-winning artist Keith Tyson, whom she bumps into at that big New York sale (or possibly on the phone, of course): 'I don't have any problem with the market for art. It is an elegant Darwinian system. Some collectors are effectively buying futures options on a work's cultural significance.' Indeed. And time will tell whether they would have been better off investing in pork bellies or South Sea Bubbles.

Maev Kennedy writes on heritage for the Guardian.