

A Computer in the Art Room

The Origins of British Computer Arts 1950-1980

Synopsis

This book analyses the major routes into computer based arts in Britain from the post-World War II period, with artists informed by cybernetics, to the early 1980s, with the advent of personal computing. It argues that new frameworks for collaboration between arts and sciences were established during this period, evident particularly in academic institutions and artist-led initiatives. A re-organisation of the art educational system, an expanded notion of the art object encouraged by the artistic counter-culture of the 1960s and for a brief time, a sympathetic governmental framework enabled art with a techno-scientific basis to flourish particularly within schools of art and design.

Conclusions are drawn as to why most activity existed outside the mainstream art world of museum and dealer-gallery networks. The field of early computer arts is a rare example of inter-disciplinary collaboration within modernism in Britain in the period. It is this diversity which has a major bearing on how the art was and continues to be perceived by the art world. Ultimately, many computer artists were forced to move in different directions in part due to a lack of mainstream institutional support. Artist-led initiatives, again largely located outside the mainstream art world, were an integral part of the development of computer arts. Formal and informal networks organised by practitioners were able to address the challenge of exhibition and dissemination of work in a field that was not necessarily readily accepted or understood. This book uncovers and records the history of an artistic practice that is little known and in particular the crucial role played by a number of art schools in fostering collaborations which continue to contribute to Britain's leading role in the education and production of contemporary art. It concludes that early British computer arts with its emphasis on craft, materiality and interactivity, is not only one of the last aspects of modernism, but also provides a gateway to postmodernism.