Book review

Simple Thoughts, Peter Beyls Monograph,
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There are all sorts of interesting things one can do to generate, manipulate, translate, randomise, make interactive, or constrain, objects or processes using software. The problem facing computer based arts across the six decades of their existence has always been what objects or processes, and why? And then, what forms do these manipulations or generations take: simply, what do they look like? Or do they generate, demand, even incorporate, a new way of seeing and thinking? One might add, a new way of criticising, of curating, new discourses, new histories; but these have catastrophically been in short supply, hence computer art's massive failure to be where it belongs, at the cutting edge of contemporary art. Over-celebrated for the wrong, usually technical reasons, terribly short term, ephemeral, overly prone to technological determinism, over romanticised and over there in the corner of the gallery in any exhibition not specifically about such art. Or in the vaults. Remember all the fractals, the 3-D objects reflecting other 3-D objects? Where are they now? There was a time - the 1980s - when you couldn't pick up a glossy art magazine without seeing on the cover the Mandelbrot set or a person with long, streaming hair looking at the future through a virtual reality headset or manipulating some meretricious nonsense via a data-glove. Why are they almost never part of displays of other artworks contemporaneous with them? Whose fault is it? The artists'? The curators'? The public's? The critics' (what critics)? Such phenomena were at best controlled explosions in the provincial airports of the mind.

And yet...what some of the artists were doing, across the decades, embodied ideas that are still vivid for art. Concepts utterly important today, potentials screaming to be realised. Some computer art was not like conceptual art, it was conceptual art. Some of it, more than we might think (more than some may have wanted?) was implicitly or explicitly political. There was no RND function in the Soviet equivalent of BASIC. Zagreb, figuratively, changed this.

But, the casual art observer might ask, although I shiver with delight at the idea of 'taking a line for a walk', when confronted with a random or stochastic line exploring, as it were, its own space on paper or screen, when it's this literal, what should I think? The answer depends on what year it is. In the 1960s, a typical reaction would have been to observe the phenomenon as one might consider an aircraft's vapour trail or a slug's slime or Doctor Johnson's dancing Fennec Fox or whatever it was. And a small subheading in an alternative magazine would ask "But is it art?". In the 1970s, after the odd piece in a literary magazine touching upon computer intelligence (perhaps glossing Joseph Weizenbaum's doomed attempt to show that you couldn't fool people with a computer simulation of a mad Rogerian psychotherapist as a glimpse into a white-hot technological future) the idea that the line might in some sense have a destiny, might be trying to tell us something, or that we might in some small but salacious way be responsible for it, would have been possible. Especially if it was in some way constrained, such that we could set up an internal dialogue about freedom

(hurrah!) and limits (boo!). There may have been the start of an Atlantic divide here, in that, to unfairly generalise, Americans sought to extend freedom within, of course, limits, whereas Europeans misunderstood this, thinking they meant there were no longer any limits at all. Is it stretching things too far to suggest that American computer (only computer) art became pictorial, and British, for example, more conceptual? There is of course an argument about who started conceptual art in general, but while Sol Lewitt was making rules and procedures to produce not quite systematic spectacles, the British members of Art & Language were pirouetting atop the circus ring raining tracts about rigorously fucking up everything in artistically and politically adequate ways down onto the bemused ranks of those in the cheapest seats who still asked for their money back. And computer newspapers were asking of the portentous line: "But is it art?".

The early 1980s would only have been satisfied if the line was in colour, and had a minimum resolution of 320 points, at least horizontally. It should preferably change colour too, flash, dance, or otherwise become a wonder (Guy Debord would surely have seen much computer art of the time, sponsored by arms manufacturers, shown in foyers or at trade shows, as the purest of spectacles). It also had to be interactive, of course. We had seen the arrival of people from MIT, funded by the Naval Ordnance Laboratory, huge unclassified interactive laser discs in hand, with animated instructions on how to mend a missile - sorry - how to fix a bicycle. Works had to be interactive and didactic. And the British Airways inflight magazine asked of the line drawn according to inputs phoned in from Montreal, Tokyo and the British East Midlands: "But is it art?".

By the 1990s such a trace would have had to be ironic at best. (Critics might have known much about art, but they didn't know what they liked, and had to be told by juries of the great and good at Siggraph, Ars Electronica and so on, who strove to be unbiased, occasionally succeeding.)

The book is printed oddly, text almost reaching the margins, the many images on matt paper, the whole looking as if made on an ink-jet printer. Actually I love this, because it throws into relief the monumental nature of the work. Yes, monumental. I never thought that a collection including sometimes very sparse drawings would appear rock solid, but it does. It isn't just their visual quality that makes them so, but the way that most of them first intrigue, then stimulate the art theorist in us all, then make you return to them in a new way.

Much of the history of drawn - or rather thought, see later - computer art is here, a primer for us all as well as an expert account of an artist's development. The essays are extraordinarily helpful too.

As someone who has experienced it, I can confirm the joyful, almost cathartic experience of working, exploring, in the border area between the algorithmic and the... What, aesthetic? Humanly artistic? This begs so many questions. But take an algorithm, producing, let's say, multiple versions of a graphic representation of some simple form and drawing them in ink on paper in some matrix, perhaps a hundred by a hundred repetitions, in a square format. There might be variation in each instance of the form, to do with direction, angle, presence or absence of lines, things like that.

This already looks interesting, and forty or more years ago was revolutionary not because something like such systems had not been tried before, but because the relative speed and brute force of the computation paradoxically opened up a holistic, gestalt, wave of results. Results which, in their critical mass, exploded outwards from the artwork. I would say that much of the work of Systems Group artists, for example, done without computers, by hand, although ostensibly instances of similar rules, whilst not being incestuously self-referential still rarely went outwards, towards the universal, in the same way that the computer art did. Certainly, the visual output of the computational process inevitably - inevitably! How artists long for this to be true of their work - proposed doing other stuff. Such as introducing random or stochastic variations in the rules themselves and in the parameters to which they applied. Vulgarly, straight lines could become squiggly. Things could go anywhere!

In the paragraph above I initially made a typing error, and instead of explosion wrote 'explision'. The idea of explosive unfolding (French 'plier', to fold or bend) is an accidental idea I shall use elsewhere but which also fits some of the work perfectly.

I mentioned the border area, because it was exactly in the interplay between the algorithmic, the random, and deciding what, artistically, one could or even should do with that, that a new field of art opened. And along with it came questions of aesthetics, of meaning, of creativity and so on. Even - dare I say especially? - questions of a political nature. If one can do, as it were, anything, if that feeling is even stronger than when one is confronted by an empty canvas, because it's so dynamic...what should one do? It is an interesting question as to why, seemingly, an instance of a rule made or drawn by hand might, on a good day, grope towards massive, human possibilities in the way that, say, a Rembrandt succeeds in doing whilst, to your reviewer at least, work such as Beyls' operates in an entirely different way, on a meta-level, about such things. I've said it before: the better the computer art, the more it is about human ways and behaviours, just as the best interactive art always makes you look at the participants.

This is a tiny fraction of the thoughts and questions that arise from this encyclopaedic collection and examination of Beyls' work. It, and the excellent essays accompanying the work, by people such as Frieder Nake and Beyls himself, offer a magisterial overview of and insight into not only his work but also part of the history of computer based art. And of course, of course, it is ultimately, as the book's title implies, about thinking. The art is, as Nake says, thought, rather than drawn. The drawing came later, especially when there were no screens to show the fine detail, and you had to wait for the drawing to emerge from a pen plotter, which might take a very long time indeed. Time in which to think. Watching the increments of X and Y, the emergent properties of the whole, the take-up of the ink on the paper, the doorbell ringing, the plotter still moving, nothing frozen, ever again.

This book is a model for the art itself. Opening it, one sees pictures of lines and modules, variations and similarities, interspersed by words. But I have literally never seen a book concerned with computer art which so clearly represents the power of the particular to go to the universal, the desire of the human mind to

transcend itself in the interplay between the internal and the external, and the liberty that comes from apparent constraint. And with that, responsibility, now so lacking in much new media art. Art surely needs to be, but rarely is, both competent and adequate, and a fortiori books 'about' art. The artworks are, and the book is.