

## Cyberart

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**Abstract:** It is difficult to label the work of cyberartists. Cyberart is an extremely large umbrella which spans a very broad spectrum, encompassing many different art forms; paintings, photographs, text, electronic music, performance art and films to name but a few. So evidently, one's own interpretation of cyberart is as valid as the next man's. This study presents examples of Cyberart. It does not pretend to unravel the mystery but it attempts to prise open various attempts at merging art and cyberspace. It presents the key players and some of the thoughts of those involved in this new arena.

**Key words:** Multimedia, photo editing, fine art

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### INTRODUCTION

"The definition of art has always belonged to those who perpetually resided in its potentially cliquish realm. They readily inform ignorant voyeurs of what real art is and how to appreciate it" - Kate Robotham<sup>[1]</sup>.

Cyberart is defined by Dictionary.com as 'Art that is produced with the help of computer hardware and software'. Kate Robotham suggests that cyberart is attempting to make its way into the recognized world of art, but may 'find it difficult to climb into the somewhat elitist category of fine art' and quips 'make room Leonardo and meet Mr. Microchip'<sup>[1]</sup>. Robotham is not however devoid of praise for cyberart, she presents a valid point when she proposes that 'it is after all the only artistic medium which drops the experience of viewing it from five senses to only two, yet still moves the spirit'.

Greg Harper, the Executive Director and Curator of the Cape Museum of Fine Arts, states that new artistic approaches and capabilities are being discovered at the rate of nanoseconds and appear almost fanciful when compared to preceding artistic evolutionary steps, such as the change from tempera to oil, or the printmaking techniques of the twentieth century<sup>[2]</sup>. He discusses how computers offer an astonishing accessibility to image making, encompassing both still and moving forms and discusses how it is possible for images to be expressed in many mediums as a frame-able print, a CD ROM, or distributed over the Internet with a pre-set life span.

"Is cyberart a bum steer?" is the brusque question posed by Christopher Green, a self professed (albeit unwittingly so) cyberartist<sup>[3]</sup>. "If you're anything like me,

you have no idea what cyberart is either" he says and then muses whether it is in effect 'the cutting edge of creative expression', or in fact 'some ill-conceived marketing notion destined to become a bane to those who engage in its creation... a sort of cultural Y2K bug'.

Indeed Green states that he too has found no correct definition for 'cyberart'. There exists, he claims, definitions for 'cyberspace', 'cybersex' and even 'cyberbunny', but none for 'cyberart'<sup>[3]</sup>. The definition for 'cyber' he continues, is: "A prefix used in a growing number of terms to describe new things that are being made possible by the spread of computers". Green is unimpressed with this however, suggesting this implies cyberart is merely art made possible by the spread of computers and "this is clearly not descriptive of his work!" he retorts. Instead he likens cyberart to setting sail on a wonderful oceanic journey, this is because the word cybernetics is actually derived from the Greek word 'kybernetes', which in turn means 'the science of steering ships'. This, he says, is where he can see the root of the meaning of cyberart that he can relate to! Green has taken part in the Boston Cyberarts Festival<sup>[4]</sup> and once produced a piece of cyberart entitled *Sleep Ritual*, which was 'a performance of spontaneously composed electronic music and minimalist theater - filmed and recorded and produced into streaming content for the Internet'.

**Teaching cyberart:** Irina Aristarkhova of the Cyberarts Research Initiative runs a pioneering studio-based Cyberarts course at the University of Singapore<sup>[5]</sup>. She has published and lectured widely on cyberculture and cyberarts and is a contributing editor on the editorial



Fig. 1: Remote Lecture



Fig. 2: Cyberart Studio G4's



Fig. 3: The Cyberart Resource Library at NUS

board of the journal "Radek: Art, Theory, Politics" (Moscow) and on the Academic Board of Digital Art and Culture (DAC) annual conference and exhibition (RMIT, Australia).

The Cyberart Studio (Fig. 1 and 2) enables students who take modules in the studio to be trained in various fields, including cyberarts, digital media production, cyberculture, information society and scientific visualization through intensive studio-based workshops, seminars and guest lectures. The Cyberart Studio houses 22 Macintosh G4 PowerMac stations capable of handling digital painting, digital photography, video editing and animation.

The Cyberart Resource Library as illustrated in Fig. 3, has a specially chosen cross-disciplinary selection of printed and multi-media materials, two viewing Mac and PC stations and full audio-video-laptop projection facility. Students are welcome to use the library resources to lookup information with regards to their work. Materials cannot be borrowed and should be used only within the library for research purposes.

Another site is Cyberartlearning.com,<sup>[6]</sup> which is devoted to educating and encouraging all aspiring artists around the world. It aims to allow users to 'learn to paint from the comfort of home with an interactive instructor!' It offers features such as virtual art classes, online tutorials, galleries, newsletters and a 'pictionary'. Cyberartlearning uses various teaching systems to educate the interactive artist such as web cams, virtual classrooms, audio and text chat rooms and special programs to digitally correct art work. Users/artists can follow the course at their own pace, perfecting the art techniques discussed, module after module, post their work and receive a professional critique.

A sample critique of a student called Paul follows. Paul's original work in illustrated is Fig. 4 and the edited version by the tutor is shown in Fig. 5.

The tutors comment in this case was ..... "Paul, Your drawing is excellent. The way you set the elements in the foreground gives it such a realistic look. I bet the viewer feels like just walking right in. Better make sure you don't leave in on the floor, otherwise someone might hurt himself. LOL! (He submitted a very large painting 7' by 8'). I'm glad you sent this to me. When I opened it, I immediately knew which medicine to give it (See the edited version attached). Do you see an improvement?"

Each budding artist requires painting materials and medium of their choice, a notebook and pencil to take notes during lectures, a computer with an internet connection, speakers or headphones and a microphone. If one wishes to engage in audio communication, one also requires a microphone. A sample lesson entitled 'Anatomy of Winter Trees' can be viewed at [2222].

**Automatic Art:** AARON is the brain child of Professor Harold Cohen<sup>[7]</sup>. AARON is a program which spontaneously draws pictures on screen, simple black line sketches and proceeds to colour them in using colours of its own choice. Cohen claims that this cybematic artist is an artist in the very truest sense of the word, due to its unique usage of colour and composition<sup>[7]</sup>. AARON's paintings, which in a sense represent Cohen's life work, have hung in museums around the world including London's Tate Modern Gallery, Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Washington Capitol Children's Museum.



Fig. 4: Paul's original painting



Fig. 5: Tutors Edited version



Fig. 6: Drawing by AARON



Fig. 7: Plotting pen making a hard copy of an AARON drawing



Fig. 8: Rodney Chang (Pygoya)

AARON can be installed as a screen saver creating an endless sequence of original art. No two AARON paintings are alike. Each line being drawn can be watched and each colour being applied, stroke by stroke. AARON paints, with a rather bleak, childlike quality, using brash, vivid primary colours, of which we were initially dubious, unimpressed even. However, over time, watching him silently sketch his soulless figures, with their gaunt expressions and gangly stances we became quite fond of AARON. We have known people to actually reduce the wait time on screen savers in order to watch him draw more frequently.

**Cyberartists:** "Cyberart has not yet been defined, let's see what it is... let's help others to see what it is, who'll decide, artist or viewer?... Yet to be determined..."  
- Dennis O'Carney.

Some of the leading lights who are helping to create a definition of cyberart include Rodney Chang and Regina Frank. These are discussed here.

**Rodney Chang:** Rodney Chang, who is better known as the cyberartist Pygoya (Fig. 8) and founder of the 'webism' movement, is legendary among his peers and admirers<sup>[8]</sup>. He is acknowledged in America's 'Who's Who' and has appeared on 'Ripley's Believe It or Not' for earning ten college degrees, including five masters and two doctorates. Chang studied mostly in Chicago and holds a masters in 'Painting/Studio Arts' and also in 'Computer Art', as well as a Ph.D in 'Aesthetic Psychology'. A further masters in 'Psychology of Counselling' is said to 'contribute seeded subliminal content to his cyberart'. He has also contributed to Freudian, Behaviourist and Holistic psychological theories<sup>[9]</sup>. In 1985 Chang was the first digital artist to exhibit in Honolulu. Since then he has exhibited around the world, including France (Paris), New York City, Russia (St. Petersburg), China (Shanghai), Germany (Frankfurt), England, Australia, Hawaii, India (Calcutta), Japan, Austria (Vienna) and Hungary (Budapest).



Fig. 9: Division of Labour-Bronx Museum of the arts in New York

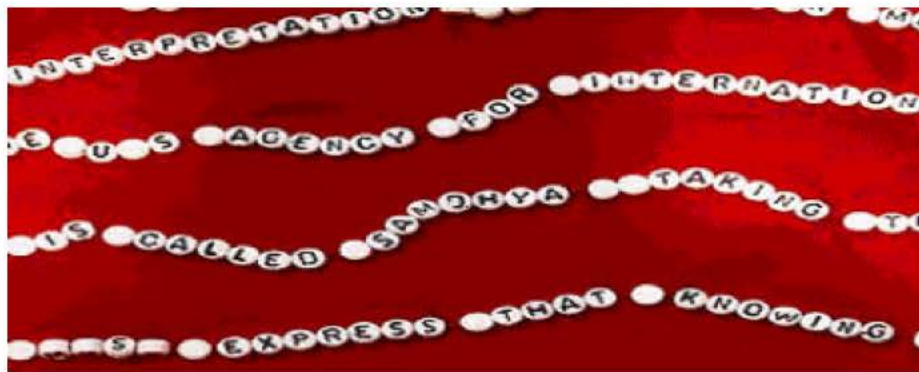


Fig. 10: Dress detail

In 1988 his solo show at Shanghi Art Museum was China's historic first computer art exhibition. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Chang completed his first major project of computer art, comprising in excess of one hundred and fifty large painted canvases, referred to as cyberpaintings, or 'paint outs', as in 'print outs'. Since this Chang has channeled his creative works solely into digital online display in his virtual 3D Pygoya web museum, established in 1997. In 1999 Chang made history in organizing and traveling to Calcutta for India's first ever international digital art exhibition. In 2002, Chang was curator of East Hawaii's first cyberart exhibition and world tour and Chang's online museum proudly greeted its 1 millionth visitor. Chang's latest contribution was a '100 Cyberbabies' exhibition for 2002. This is basically newborn art for the internet and was closely followed by 100 more in 2003. More recently Chang has 'expanding the boundaries of our resources of remembering the deceased' with his eccentric virtual cemetery project that is a part of emerging Cyberculture.

**Regina Frank:** Regina Frank is a curious Berlin based cyberartist whose works are a peculiar form of cyberart

referred to as 'performance-installation'. Frank's continuous working title is 'The Artist is Present', or 'Die KünstlerIn ist anwesend. Frank<sup>[10]</sup> has exhibited her work widely since 1990, performing in many locations including Japan, New York, Los Angeles, Switzerland, Munich and Berlin itself. Frank's work illustrates just one the many varying methodologies one can employ as a cyberartist today. Frank studied an apprenticeship in sewing, culminating in a degree as a professional tailor and from 1987 to 1994 worked within various language, performance and costume design departments across Berlin.

She has been conducting a traveling long-duration-performance, for almost two years wearing a nomadic red dress (Fig. 9). Frank refers to herself as the mistress of Hermes, the messenger of the Greek gods, a fanciful notion and the *raison d'être*, best left described in her own words:

"The flirtation with the messenger of the gods, Hermes, is an investigation of the global, immaterial exchange of information in the virtual space. "Hermes Mistress" attempts to bridge high technology with the traditional technique of handiwork. She begins daily her

quest by selecting and collecting information from the "Internet". The intangible data, once harvested, is saved onto her portable computer at which point she begins the now manual task of materializing the text letter beads, as embroidery for the red silk gown that she wears. In spirals the chains of information swirl up her dress, slowly and delicately detailing the island that Hermes' Mistress surrounds herself with."<sup>[10]</sup>

Frank's journey in the huge dress originally began in New York. She continued her performance in Berlin in the window of 'Kunsthalle', presented by Art+Com e.V. Her next step led her to London to the Independent Art Space presented by Gallery Eigen and Art, followed by a further exhibition at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in New York to 'The red Queen' at Frauenmuseum Bonn, Germany and to 'Divisions of Labour' at MOCA, Los Angeles and to the exhibition "Join Me" at Spiral-Wacoal Art Centre in Tokyo. It is Frank's intention to continue her journey until the spiral reaches the centre of her body<sup>[11]</sup>.

**Cyberarts festivals:** A biennial Cyberarts Festival<sup>[4]</sup> is organized by Boston Cyberarts Inc, a non-profit making arts organization who are dedicated to the exploration and presentation of artists who are working with new technologies. Their mission statement informs the reader that it is their intention to *'exhibit and promote the media and digital arts of Boston, New England and the world to audiences in the New England region and beyond and by doing so, helping to promote a sense of media and digital literacy, locally and regionally'*. Artists and high-technology professionals, who use computers to advance traditional visual and performing arts disciplines as well as to create new interactive worlds, participate from all around the world. The variety seems unbounded, including exhibitions of music, dance, visual arts, theatrical performances, educational programs, film and video presentations and lecture demonstrations and symposia. Such events usually take place at locations and venues in and around Boston. These may include physical locations such as museums, galleries, theaters, artist's studios, educational institutions and other public places. A 'key component of the festival' is an accompanying website dedicated to the festival which is designed to encourage participation from distant areas<sup>[4]</sup>. Audience members for the festival are drawn from across the divide of the 'arts going public' and people involved in high technology' in the Boston area. The festival website hosts a virtual gallery entitled 'HyperArtSpace'. A section for youngsters from all over the world can submit digital self portraits, called 'Faces of Tomorrow'. There is a database known as 'APropos', an artist's

proposal database where artists and organizations from across the globe can work collaboratively. There is also an extensive amount of reading material about artists working with new technologies in all mediums.

One last point raised by Kurt Shaw, an art critic for the American Tribune is worth noting. He writes in that women employ technology in very different ways to men<sup>[12]</sup>. He describes 'cyberart' exhibitions shown at The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust's Wood Street Galleries, as increasingly frequent and concludes that the galleries' current exhibition is no surprise. He states that 'Allure Electronica,' as it is known, simply follows suit. The significant point this time being, that this show of digital art by six internationally recognized artists, is that all of them are women. He maintains that women use technology in different ways - "This group show is all women to point out that woman can use technology in a very, very different way than men do, in the sense that each of these pieces has a narrative component. It's more about the content of the work than the actual medium, which tends to be a prevalent preoccupation for men." Hence the title, 'Allure Electronica,' which is a play on 'Ars Electronica', the world's premiere festival of media art held each year in Linz, Austria, which attracts a mostly male dominated, 'techie' sort of crowd.

So, is the term cyberart simply misleading? Green believes it is. He proclaims it is merely 'one of those catch phrases that we create as a means to sell something to other people'. He concludes; 'calling something art does not make it art' and 'tacking the word art onto the end of cyber-, does not make that art either'. At the other end of the spectrum, the famous cyberartist *Pygoya* refers to cyberart as the 'Virtual Art of Webism' and gives a somewhat lengthy definition of his understanding of this innovative art form. He states that it is art that is displayed and exists only in virtual or Cyberspace. He states that currently, the virtual space of the World Wide Web on the Internet is Cyberart's domain and through the breakthrough of technology and specifically telecommunications-cyberart is art that can be experienced globally and from different locations at the same moment in time.

Jeremy Young concedes that *'cyberart operates to preserve the authority of man over machine'*<sup>[13]</sup> and fortunately for us man is prevented from ultimately becoming a cyborg, or mere automaton, primarily because cyberart functions by utilising and conserving a mortal ability, the ability to assert oneself over a machine, indeed the noble ability to imagine and create<sup>[13]</sup>. In short, Young's point, pretty much, is the need for us to re-assess our basic concepts of how we perceive art and to

acknowledge, that despite the fact cyberart has found its way into the ‘*established canons of art*’, that this was not indicative of a universal critical acceptance of its nuance and we should not, at the risk of becoming cyborgs, overlook that factor.

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