

Codifying History: the CAT Project Examines the International Trajectory of Computer Art 1975-2000

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The Victoria and Albert Museum is the UK's national museum of art and design. In recent years the V&A has received two major collections of computer-generated art and design, one from the Computer Arts Society, London, and the other from Patric Prince, an American art historian and collector. Together with more recent acquisitions, the museum now holds the UK's national collection of this type of material. Our holdings continue to grow and now include some 500 art works, consisting predominantly of two-dimensional works on paper. Alongside the art collection, the V&A also holds the archives of both the major donors. Patric Prince's archive contains her ongoing correspondence with artists, details of the many exhibitions she organised for SIGGRAPH and the Los Angeles New Art Foundation, exhibition cards and press for most major computer-related art exhibitions and conferences from the 1980s onwards, as well as a substantial library of important books and texts. The archive also includes a selection of audio-visual material and computer files containing artists' interviews and show-reels.

The computer-generated art collection sits within the V&A's Word and Image Department, which includes prints, drawings, paintings, photographs and designs, as well as the National Art Library. The Museum began collecting computer-generated art and design as early as 1969, with the purchase of a portfolio of prints from the Cybernetic Serendipity exhibition held at the ICA in 1968. However, activity ceased until relatively recently, in part because of the difficulties of preserving fragile computer-generated material, but also because of its exclusion for many years by the mainstream art world.

In its early years as the South Kensington Museum, the V&A attempted to unite the arts and sciences. Its collecting policies continue to emphasise the importance of technique and process, meaning that the Museum is ideally placed to accommodate a collection of this nature. The computer's arrival into creative practices and industries around the world must rank as one of the most culturally significant developments of the twentieth century. By situating the collection with the Word and Image Department, we are able to assess the impact of this arrival on the field itself, as well as on related

areas such as graphic design or printmaking, in which the V&A also specialises. The collection's position amongst the wider departmental holdings, which now consists of ca. 1.5 million objects, allows for new approaches to the study of computer-generated art and design. For example, an early photographic print from the collection by Ben Laposky which was created using an analogue oscilloscope, was included in the Museum's 2008/2009 *'History of Photography'* display.

The Museum's 2009/2010 display entitled *Digital Pioneers* showcased highlights from the collection and did much to raise awareness of this lesser known field of art and design. The display ran consecutively with *Decode: Digital Design Sensations*, a major exhibition of contemporary digital art and design in the V&A's Porter Gallery. The exhibition featured a number of major new commissions and included such well known names such as Danny Brown, John Maeda, rAndom International and Julius Popp. The opening section of *Decode* featured works that had been carefully crafted from code, demonstrating the legacy that had been left behind by the 'digital pioneers' of decades earlier. *Decode* attracted a younger audience to the museum; a demographic highly conversant with digital technologies, yet mostly unaware of art and design's 50 year relationship with computing. The importance of this relationship was grounded in the V&A's *Decoding the Digital* conference in February 2010, which brought together early computer art pioneers, such as Frieder Nake and Roman Verostko, with contemporary designers such as Casey Reas and Karsten Schmidt, for whom the early practitioners had been a source of inspiration.

The collections of computer-generated art and design have brought their own particular sets of problems in terms of documentation and preservation. With funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Museum has been involved in a research project with Birkbeck. A lasting benefit of the project is that all of the artworks are now included on the V&A's website and can be found via the "Search the Collections" service (at collections.vam.ac.uk). In parallel, we are reliant on new and ongoing conservation research to help deal with preservation issues. The staging of *Decode* meant that artists and designers had to work closely with the V&A's Conservation Department to accommodate factors such as the duration of the show and its interactive nature. At the final count some 90,000 visitors came through the exhibition's doors in just 4 months, providing us with a valuable insight into the problems of acquiring and maintaining digital art. *Decode* also offered an opportunity to revisit our policy for collecting born-digital art and design. In May 2010, the V&A decided to acquire *Study for a Mirror*, by rAndom International, an earlier version of which was included in the show. Stemming from earlier investigations into printing or painting with light, *Study for a Mirror* detects when a viewer is in front of the work and then 'paints' the onlooker's image onto the screen. Within minutes the image has faded away and the portrait is lost. The impermanence and ephemeral nature of the work hints at many of the problems that museums face in collecting this type of material, including questions of durability and life span.