

Computer Baroque: digital animation, art and experiment

Curated by Richard Wright

Presented by Animate Projects animateprojects.org

Friday 20 March 2009, 19.00

Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium

Programme One:

Computer Baroque

A selection of defining works in the history of artists' digital moving image. Rarely seen, they represent a period – the late eighties and early nineties - in which computer animation was the focus for the most audacious and exuberant experiments across all areas of new media, art and technology.

Why characterise this period as 'Baroque'? I think it was the sense that by the late 1980s we had at last reached a stage where more than just a handful of insiders were able to harness the power of computers. Artists wanted to push the computer as far as it would go, to create visual transformations that defied previous traditions, to blend image and music and text, to apply scientific ideas as new sources of inspiration. It created a strident kind of image that insisted on the fact of its own realisation, fleeting paeans to the artificial. Yet equally present was a nagging anxiety, that this artifice was an illusion that disguised totalizing control, paranoia and catastrophe. Richard Wright

Victory Sausage (John Witney, USA, 1987, 2'37")

A very rarely seen film by pioneer experimental filmmaker John Witney. He wrote that it signified a personal 'victory' for him because he had been able to use the computer to achieve a fusing of music and image that had been his lifetime goal. First seen at the SIGGRAPH computer graphics conference, for younger artists it felt as though this giant figure had declared that the computer had finally come of age as an artist's medium.

Channel 4 logo (Robinson Lambie-Nairn, UK, 1982, 10")

The logo that launched the UK's new independent television station was also a landmark, if legends are to be believed, in requiring the contribution of nearly every artist, designer and software engineer in the UK then practicing computer animation. So ambitious was it that it had to be rendered in the US by Information International Inc using a supercomputing facility that had originally been set up by John Witney's son, John Witney Jnr.

Particle Dreams (Karl Sims, USA, 1988, 1'30")

Primordial Dance (Karl Sims, USA, 1991 1'35")

These lesser-known works by a major figure show how Karl Sims was able to bring out what was both scientifically and artistically original in the computer graphics research of the period. The first shows 'sketches' of particle systems research, while in the second Sims developed a technique that 'evolved' mathematical equations to produce such breathtaking visual artifice that it seems to challenge our human parameters of what constitutes an image.

Eggy (Yoichiro Kawaguchi, Japan, 1990, 3'48")

Few computer animators could equal the overwhelming, needlepoint visual intensity of Kawaguchi's virtual exotica. One of the world's leading researchers into "blobby" organic modelling, he depicted a world composed of molten, shape-shifting organs without a body.

Evolution of Form (William Latham, UK, 1990, 2'30")

William Latham was a figure that dominated computer art and animation in the UK through his use of "evolutionary" algorithms. Latham aimed at remodelling the entire creative process, "mutating" the most startling yet controlled virtual sculptures that had so far been seen.

Ex Memorium (Beriou, France, 1992, 5'10")

Beriou bucked the trend of 3D computer animation to become a master of 2D image manipulation, developing his trademark motif of tentacle like body parts, weaving an infinitely extendable territory of interconnected memories, tumours and scars.

The Garden - 21st Century Amateur Film (Tamas Waliczky, Hungary, 1992, 4'30")

Tamas Waliczky described this as an "amateur film" composed of shots of his young son in their garden. However, its home grown nature also extended to the fact that Waliczky constructed the film according to his own 'water drop' perspective system.

These are the Days (John Tonkin, Australia, 1994, 3'10")

John Tonkin wrote his own physical simulation software to choreograph this simple but elegiac meditation on the bureaucratic paper trails that measure the passage of our lives.

Data Driven: The Story of Franz K (Chris Landreth, Canada, 1993, 3'15")

A very early animated study by the future Oscar winning animator Chris Landreth. Here we see the roots of Landreth's approach of perverting the latest high end 3D animation to fabricate Kafkaesque, jigsaw monsters with jarring incongruities.

Neo Geo: An American Purchase (Peter Callas, Australia, 1989, 9'20")

Video artist Peter Callas took every conceivable sign, symbol and icon in the history of American culture and then skilfully used the computer to compress them into a single stream of screaming visual excess.

A New Life (Simon Biggs, UK, 1989, 4')

With works such as this, *Golem* and *Alchemy*, artist Simon Biggs began an illuminating investigation into parallels between medieval hermetics and the arcane practices of data processing, genetic engineering and artificial life.

What She Wants (Ruth Lingford, UK, 1994, 5')

Ruth Lingford gave her 'hand-drawn' erotic fantasy a heightened lucidity by distilling it through the low-tech graphics of the Commodore Amiga computer.

Maxwell's Demon (James Duesing, US, 1991, 7'30")

Duesing depicts the minutiae of life in a fictitious ecological disaster area, gaining a complexity of characterisation and scale by drawing with the early 'electronic paint' systems.

Free Society (Paul Garrin, USA, 1988, 4')

Paul Garrin (who produced the video sequences for Nam June Paik's sculptures) used his camcorder footage of the Tomkins Square riots to create this classic piece of polemic, expressing his outrage through digital video effects that literally attacked their own subjects.

Polly Gone (Shelley Lake, US, 1988, 2'37")

Shelley Lake's film flagrantly disregarded all the conventions of 3D computer animation. In this domestic satire, it's chunky, unglamorous female robot flails around with such a sense of abandon that it is paradoxically liberating.

The City is No Longer Safe (The Butler Brothers, UK, 1994, 2')

Before gaining popular success with their "Workgroup Alpha" series for E4, the Butler Brothers took the naïve, breeze-block style of 3D animation and produced this discordant satire of a rabbit society in an urban security compound.

Heliocentrum (Jason White and Richard Wright, UK, 1995, 11'15")

By combining elements of political documentary, techno-culture and a virtual simulation of Louis XIV's pleasure palace at Versailles, this film constructed a riotous history of our fascination with digital special effects, surveillance and addiction to media spectacle.

An online exhibition of Computer Baroque is at animateprojects.org from April - July 2009