

# COMPUTER GUARDIAN

Michael Wenyon, Ron Geesin and Susan Gamble at the Royal Greenwich Observatory at Herstmonceux Castle, East Sussex

## Michael Prochak on the uses of computers in the arts, from desktop publishing to the Greenwich Observatory

# The days of miracle and wonder

AMONG people working in the arts, there has been a traditional unease about technology and a clear distinction between machines and art. Machines, we are told, are designed to do, while art is designed to be. Yet historically, the development of new tools and materials has repeatedly given fresh impulses to the arts. Today, the uncomfortable distinctions between art and technology are beginning to blur with computers and related technology enriching both the aesthetic and organisational workplace of artists and arts service agencies alike.

For public arts agencies, the computer's ability to solve difficult problems and handle large quantities of information quickly and accurately has obvious advantages. Although arts organisations in Britain have been slower to accept computers than their American counterparts, public arts administrators are beginning to focus more and more on information systems and management capabilities. Growing pressure for accurate, sophisticated information has encouraged them to explore new ways to meet their needs within budget and staff restrictions without compromising their organisational purposes or ef-

fectiveness. For example, the Arts Council of Great Britain, after years of consultation and debate, has recently approved the installation of a North Star computer system to standardise, in theory, all of their financial and information retrieval needs.

Nearly all 12 of the country's Regional Arts Associations (RAAs) have also computerised to a greater or lesser extent, with a varied array of systems ranging from ageing dedicated word processors to over-priced and over-powered multi-user UNIX workstations. Earlier this year, as a first small step towards the establishment of a shared information network, all 12 RAAs also agreed to go on-line with the Artslink service on Telecom Gold.

While most RAAs have begun to acknowledge the administrative benefits computers can provide, few have recognised its potential for artistic creativity.

In 1984/85, South East Arts, the regional arts association for Kent, East Sussex, and Surrey, demonstrated an unusually keen awareness of the impact computers and information technology would have on the future of practising artists. In partnership with the Arts Council and the University of Kent



at Canterbury, South East Arts initiated and funded Stephen Bell (not the Guardian cartoonist) as the country's first computer artist in residence. The residency was based in the university's computing laboratory and the colourful images which formed the basis of a major exhibition were produced using a Dec VAX 11/750 linked to a Sigma graphics terminal.

At that time, South East Arts, unlike many other regional arts associations, was beginning to take a serious interest in computers and information technology, not only as an artistic and administrative tool, but also as an exciting way of assimilating new levels of infor-

mation and processing creative ideas. During this period, South East Arts began to computerise its own administrative operation and in 1986, became the first RAA in England to produce its regular monthly arts magazine utilising an Apple Macintosh Plus, LaserWriter, and Aldus PageMaker desk top publishing system.

Following the success of the Stephen Bell residency, South East Arts embarked on an even more ambitious project: to bridge the age-old gap between the arts and science and technology by combining two distinctly different art forms in a way that had never been attempted before. The project,

entitled *New Vision and Sound*, launched in April of this year, placed two visual artists (who work with lasers and holograms) and an electro-acoustic musician (working with computers) in residence for six months at the Royal Greenwich Observatory at Herstmonceux Castle.

Michael Wenyon and Susan Gamble, the visual artists selected for the residency, were the founders of the first studio for creative holography in Europe at Goldsmiths College in 1980. They have exhibited holographic art worldwide and were recently featured on Channel 4's arts series *Alter Images*. The residency's musician, Ron Geesin, was a com-

poser and arranger on Pink Floyd's *Atom Heart Mother* album and currently writes primarily for film and television. Robin Denselow described him as "an accomplished composer and experimenter on the free-form edge... with a taste for the absurd."

Within the Observatory's walls, these three are fashioning a futuristic working environment which seeks to combine innovative aspects of new technology with the performance and exhibition sides of their individual practices.

The artists work directly with individual astronomers and are discovering much about the latest astronomical theories, observing the work of all

departments and actively participating in experiments. In this unusual working environment, the diverse stimuli range from 17th century engravings of comets to advanced computer *massaging* of information from the furthest known objects in the universe.

Ron Geesin, who usually composes on a Fairlight, bought an Apple Macintosh to experiment with during the residency and is currently using a Master Tracks-Pro sequencer, Digi-Design Sound Designer and the Midi-Mac Patch Librarian.

With additional business sponsorship from several high-tech companies, the artists are building a fully-integrated work of sound and vision for a final performance involving holograms, multi-track sound, computer-controlled lighting and lasers. An education programme is also running concurrently with this project concentrating on the cross-fertilisation of the three varied disciplines of visual art, music and astronomy. This programme will involve visits from selected schools in the region and will be closely linked with the artists' work reflecting many of the ideas and techniques arising from the residency itself.

The residency has turned out to be such a success that, instead of running for six months as originally planned, South East Arts is now considering an extension. The final project/exhibition will tour both artistic and scientific venues after the close of the actual residency.

Andre Breton once said that "The work of art has value only in so far as it pulses with reflexes of the future." As the arts approach the 21st century, it is encouraging that some artists and arts organisations regard technology as a tool which can provide new generations of creators with the opportunity to expand their horizons.

Michael Prochak is head of press and information at South East Arts Association.

## Finding a Niche

### MICROFILE

INMOS is hosting a special stand at Compec 87 for four British companies selling systems based on its Transputer chip. Niche Technology will show a Sun workstation upgraded to 320mips (64 megaflops) performance. White Cross will show an IBM PS/2 which can support a hundred terminals, e.g. for stock accounting. Real World Graphics has a 200mips system which can do real-time 3-D manipulation. TopExpress will show science and engineering applications.

Compec will be held at Olympia, London, from November 17-20. Call Cahners on 01-891 5051 for details.

### MacPricey

GREAT news — Apple has knocked 200 quid off its Macintosh Plus price. But it still leaves one wondering — in view of Apple's highly-automated factories and the falling dollar — how much it costs to make.

A Mac Plus has a Motorola 68000 with 1M of memory, 128K of ROM, a 9in screen with 512 by 342 graphics, a 3.5in 800K disc drive, a 78 key keyboard and a mouse. An Atari 1040ST has 1M of memory, 192K of ROM, an 11.5in screen with 640 by 400 pixel graphics, a 3.5in 720K disc drive, a 95 key keyboard and a mouse. The ST has an all-round better specification (it is better to have a 720K drive which is IBM PC data-compatible than an 800K one which isn't). Then the ST adds colour and MIDI, joystick and cartridge ports, and it runs faster than the Mac Plus. The price of the Atari ST system: £599. The price of the Mac Plus system: £2,064. Difference: £1,465.