

Democratic Collections

Art in the age of plasma

Artsource takes a bold leap into the future, to a place where digital projection has replaced canvas as the everyday collector's medium of choice. John Stringer, collector extraordinaire, and Paul Thomas, electrophile, lead us forward on this eye-opening journey ...

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By Nathan Lynch

I haven't actually been inside myself, but from what I've been told it goes like this ... You're walking down a long corridor past a bank of high-resolution digital displays. The inch-thick plasma screens are fixed to the wall just like your everyday framed print. But behind the veneer of plasma, they're hardwired with a maze of CAT5 cable back to a central server that controls the house's audio-visual stimuli.

Visitors have the option of pre-registering their personal tastes and attaching a small transponder to their clothes. That way, when they're passing through the abode the visual aesthetic is tailored to their own preferences. There's no wayward Warhols passing before the eyes of nouveaux-Impressionists in this gallery. Every visual experience is dynamic — and individually tailored.

Sound like the future? Science fiction? Astral travelling? The Louvre in 2020? Nup, it's actually Bill Gates' humble \$70m abode on the edge of Lake Washington in Seattle.

In a sense then, it is a taste of science fiction — but one thing is for sure: where Microsoft's chief software architect boldly goes, the rest of us will eventually tread.

Gates to the future

A Microsoft intern who had the good fortune to be invited into the inner sanctum of Gates Manor had the following to say about its artistic environs.

"Once into the home you are greeted by a magnificent grand staircase that descends for quite a distance. Further and further you descend, past what seems to be an annex library ... elegantly non-intrusive but screaming geekhood were sparsely placed digital canvases that, ever so often, changed the artwork on the wall," he wrote.

The idea of electronic art, of course, is nothing new. One could argue that the archetypal 'Hello World' program, which the first BASIC authors used to flash the eponymous words on their pixelated displays, was an embryonic act of electronic art.

The way that the Digital Tzars are approaching art in the new millennium, however, is fundamentally different. Rather than treating technology as an artistic medium, full of possibilities to explore, they're looking at it more opportunistically as a seamless delivery channel. Therein lies the opportunity: a chap or chappelle in 2020 might still think that Monet is the epitome of all artists — but the copy of Green Reflections in the lounge room will more likely be hung on a digital canvas than an offset printed, framed piece of paper. And he might well have bought it, along with some more contemporary works, from an online art archive.

Come with us, dear reader, into the art market of the future ...

Demos artos: aesthetics for the people

Right now, intensive R&D is being channelled into making plasma displays more prevalent and affordable. In a plasma screen, the pixels are basically tiny pockets of compressed gas. When an electrical current is applied to the pixel, the gas reacts to form a plasma — which in turn produces UV light. The design gives these screens an incredibly thin profile, high-resolution, and access to a light spectrum of up to 16 million different colours. In a nutshell, it's as thin as a framed print, has a far wider colour gamut, and one day will no doubt match offset printing in terms of resolution. At a normal viewing distance, of course, the resolution becomes indiscernible and creates the impression of 'continuous tones' — i.e., the illusion that the viewer is actually seeing Mr Monet's own sweeping brushstrokes.

So, in five years' time if it's commonplace for an Australian home to have one, two or three wall-mounted displays, the next question is, "with what will we fill these canvases?" The most obvious answer, of course, is TV. But what about those times when the tele is pumping out such a turgid menu of reality tripe and Newspeak that it becomes unwatchable even to John Citizen? Or when friends are over and something more subtle is required as a backdrop to discussion and music? This, fellow time traveller, is when the digital canvas will come into its own.

An iPics revolution?

For Paul Thomas, the curator of BEAP (Biennale of Electronic Arts Perth), it's inevitable that art will be created more and more to feed this hardware. He points out that the distribution channel is already set up — albeit to serve the publishing industry rather than consumers at this stage — in the form of online image libraries such as www.corbis.com. As well as selling stock photography, Corbis offers the world's largest collection of scanned artworks.

"It follows on from the print tradition. This all came about because, with new printing techniques, artists could suddenly make more copies of their work and sell them en masse. If you look now at Corbis, which is Bill Gates' company, it owns the largest collection of digital images in the world. But they're not interested in the original works as such — they're only interested in the digital rights to those images," Thomas said.

Microsoft's new 'Media Center' (www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/mediacenter) offers a glimpse of how this might look in the average Windows-powered suburban lounge room. A tech-savvy friend of mine has a digital projector mounted in his living room, running this platform. All of his audio-visual stimuli is operated through this infernal Media Center, using a basic remote control to navigate menus — music, TV, movies, photos, visualisations, etc.

In this context, art perhaps becomes something akin to a screensaver — not a fantastic notion for many visual artists. However, if one can not only sell an original for \$5,000, but then sell digital reproductions via an online server 5,000 times for a dollar a pop, would artists really be complaining?

Even if 'Media Center' is art as wallpaper, in the truest PC-lingo sense.

Stoking the debate

John Stringer, curator of the Kerry Stokes Collection and Perth's most eminent commentator on such matters, was a natural person to consult on the potential devaluing of 'art' as we know it.

Stringer's thoughts on the issue of 'replication' were instructive: "I don't think it matters how many examples of these works are in existence, or if they can be replicated infinitely. It doesn't affect the legitimacy of the original piece at all if it exists in duplicate. There's no reason that things like this can't be done in unlimited quantities," he said.

In short, Stringer sees nothing problematic about young groovers projecting digital copies of artworks onto their uber-white walls while sipping space juice, chatting with friends and piping out trance muzak through their Media Center enabled entertainment hub. He suggested that the idea of replicability was actually good for the art world. It meant that things were getting viewed and appreciated, rather than stashed away in dusky vaults waiting for the next Sotheby's auction.

"I really think that the art market is being screwed up by people buying for investment with no feeling for the artists' motives — why they're saying these things, why they're making these things. I think this whole thing about value in art is a bit damaging. I mean, if you collect artworks you can actually treat them like bullion and put them in a safe. That's disgusting! Artworks are made to be looked at; they're a form of visual communication. So there are certain ways in which the collecting of artworks is absolutely antithetical to the intention of the artist.

"Van Gogh, for instance, was an artist who was very poor — he was starving for most of his lifetime. But he did everything he could to get his paintings out there and let people see them. Now, of course, they're so valuable that collectors are in a position of sort of keeping them from the public and not letting people see them! So I have a lot of problems with people who are fixated on collecting solely for investment purposes. This idea of expecting things to appreciate is really corrupting the world's culture," Stringer said.

Electro-magnetism

For Paul Thomas, there's no question about the merit of the new distribution channels. They democratise art — bringing the great works (old and new) back into people's field of view, if not their living rooms.

Of course, any technology this pervasive and seductive will have deep-seated social consequences. These are the areas that we should be debating, Thomas says — not the passe preoccupation with the artistic validity of the electronic medium.

"If you're spending more of your time in your home, not going out, living through a mediated network, with all of this visual stimuli, then how does the social structure change? Is it something that you really want? Would you rather go and hang out with your mates in a bar or coffee shop with other people around, with static artworks on the wall? How does it make you think about your relationships with other people?"

At the end of the day, however, Thomas argued that the plasma revolution was destined to take hold. Whether we as individuals really want it, embrace it, profit from it, make art through it, or not.

"The thing about the notion of collecting electronic art is that now it's fairly well bug-free. People don't say 'oh, I'm going to watch TV now, I hope it's broadcasting'. Electronic art is very much like that now — it works and the possibilities are becoming mind-boggling.

"When people can draw in lots of artworks from anywhere into their house and project them and change them, and SMS photographs onto a friend's wall, or into picture frames, where will it all lead? How will we choose to work with this? All of this is possible today," he stressed.

The big question, it seems, is not so much what is possible — but how will we deal with the possibilities before us.

The mantra of our generation is truly becoming, as someone in Redmond once wrote, 'Where do you want to go today?'