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ART REVIEW; Creativity, Digitally Remastered

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THE companion digital shows now at the Whitney, "BitStreams" and "Data Dynamics," have a well-mannered air of decorous efficiency and cheerful modernity that encapsulates what you may regard as an ethos at large. Even some of the works meant to produce anxiety look clean, earnest and bland, like Starbucks. If this is the avant-garde, then the avant-garde certainly isn't what it used to be.

But both affairs will be remembered as pioneering surveys of the new technological age in art. And there is no denying the inevitability and multiple implications of the big message here, which we discount at the risk of sheer stupidity: Technology is changing how artists, especially young ones, make all types of art and, in turn, how we experience it.

You might say that artists now tinkering with laptops are only doing what cave dwellers did when they rubbed dirt on the walls at Lascaux. They are adapting the latest communicative means to their own expressive ends. Artists have always been opportunists in this sense. Artistic exploitation followed the creation of acrylic paint and videotape recorders in the last century, each opening new aesthetic avenues; the saturated colors and fuzzy pictures of early video, for example, had an aesthetic different from film and was less expensive and more convenient to edit. The best early video artists made the most of these technological pluses and minuses.

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Art Review

Digital Technology

Now we have the look of plasma screens and the fine-grain texture of computer-designed objects produced by rapid prototyping machines. Art expands to encompass new technologies. But the work produced needs to answer the same ultimate question: Does it move us?

And there's the rub. The glamour of a new medium eventually fades and becomes nostalgia at best, like the nostalgia we sometimes feel for black-and-white movies. Mostly technology is absorbed, so you barely notice it after a while. Do you now care, as an expressive matter, whether a painting is made of acrylic or oil?

"BitStreams," the main event at the Whitney, organized by Lawrence Rinder, the museum's contemporary-art curator, entails myriad art made with digital technology and includes a sound-art section (put together by another curator, Debra Singer). The smaller "Data Dynamics" sticks to Internet art about data flow via the Web.

If you are technologically insecure, you will be glad to hear that the shows are easy to grasp. "BitStreams" doesn't have a single keyboard and (surprise) displays what look like straightforward sculptures, paintings, photographs, prints and videos. The obvious point: Digital technology, infinitely mutable, can take traditional forms, too. But the difference between this work and that of countless artists, from David Hockney to Matthew Barney, who now make use of digital technology, is that the art here regards technology as a subject, not just a tool.

Abstraction prevails in the show in Minimalist and geometric variations, sometimes as moving imagery. Jeremy Blake's "Station to Station," a suite of five animated screens (he likes the term "time-based paintings"), displays shifting colors and geometric forms resolving episodically into pictures of lockers at train stations. John F. Simon Jr. uses computer programs he designs to concoct changing abstractions inspired by Klee and Mondrian: colorful highbrow screen savers,

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in effect.

There is also Conceptualism, in the traditions of John Cage, Sol LeWitt, Fluxus and other 60's artists entranced by the notions of interactivity, intangibility, ephemerality and chance.

Ephemerality in the technological age, we may note, is the product of forced obsolescence, a curious concept for art. Today's hardware and operating systems, the digital equipment artists use, will be replaced shortly by a new generation of equipment. Art conceived in the ether of digital technology is not immune to the effects of time. If anything, it is less permanent than traditional mediums, in that the technology on which it is based disappears rapidly.

Is a work of art made by an out-of-date computer system the same work when reproduced by newer, different means? Digital artists who write their own programs are inventing new signature styles. But will collectors and museums maintain and reproduce art whose engineering is obsolete? Can you imagine a viable art of old vacuum-tube radios? Or is digital art more like recorded music, transferable from 78's to compact disc?

Obsolescence is the subject of Leah Gilliam's one-note installation in "BitStreams," which uses decade-old Macs to display jumpy fragments of Super-8 movie trailers. Jason Salavon's pictures are striped and gridded abstractions made of digitalized images: in one case 336,247 frames of the film "Titanic" were averaged to their predominant colors and arranged chronologically: not a bad picture but dependent on your fascination with a digital device of passing novelty.

The issue throughout "BitStreams" is one Mr. Salavon's art raises: how these works compare to the conventional videos, films, paintings and photographs they superficially resemble. Inez van Lamsweerde's picture of herself kissing her boyfriend, with her boyfriend removed, is a digital feat but looks simply like a badly altered photograph. Jordan Crandall's "Heatseeking" video entails multifarious technologies like surveillance cameras to explore the interesting relationship between new digital information gathering and paranoia about privacy, but it's a silly movie.

So digital technology provides individual artists with tools previously available only to teams at Disney and NASA, a shift of resources, but if artists make what we already have in better versions, who cares?

The show's standouts sidestep this problem somehow. Paul Pfeiffer's latest video manipulation involves a clip of Cecil B. DeMille from the start of "The Ten Commandments" approaching but never reaching a microphone, a memorably frustrating image.

Carl Fudge's "Rhapsody Spray" is made by shape-shifting images of a Japanese animated character but works, more or less, as an abstract picture, while Robert Lazzarini makes sculptures that aren't quite like anything you've seen before, which is the real point of "BitStreams." He bends images of human skulls in his computer, then produces eye-popping models of these distorted heads cast in a compound that includes crushed bone: gimmicky but catchy objects.

"Data Dynamics," the Internet show, consists of only five works, chosen by Christiane Paul, a new Whitney curator. Marek Walczak and Martin Wattenberg's "Apartment" invites you to type words, which the computer associates with rooms ("sleep" with a bedroom, "friend" with a living room), a floor plan appearing on screen. The plan is translated into a 3-D image projected in the gallery, the walls of the apartment consisting of pictures linked to the words by a search of the Web.

You are invited to type words or phrases into Maciej Wisniewski's "netomat," which, like "Apartment," hunts the Web for associated texts and images that crawl across the wall in front of you. Mark Napier's "Point to Point" uses a motion sensor to track your movement past a screen on a wall, your path turned into a trail of words or letters that come from people clicking at the work's Web site.

Chance and interaction, old art ideas by now, have historically produced limited visual returns. Web art continues that tradition. But works like "Apartment" and "netomat," metaphors for the Web as global unconscious, suggest that the art is at least becoming more like traditional media, whereby most, but no longer all, of what you see is unremarkable.

Don't skip the sound section in "BitStreams." The 25 audio artists work squarely in the tradition of musique concrète, a half-century-old movement. Digital means have now replaced the old tape recorders. Instead of bleeping static culled from street noises and other sonic flotsam, new digital technology allows expanded aural sources to include visual imagery and light. (The work of Stephen Vitiello is an example.) These images are scanned into computers, changed into the basic binary codes that can then be retranslated into sound.

The results tend toward low-key ambience, minimalist in style. Some works sound like the glazing that would be left over if you were to remove the techno-beat from dance music. Some

blend pop and global music with talk. Sussan Deyhim, an Iranian singer, has produced an ululating trancelike track (she originally made it for an installation by the artist Shirin Neshat), which mixes her own voice with Syrian shortwave radio broadcasts.

Some of the work is illbient music, a prankish club trend made by sampling incongruous sources. There are also audio works created from micro-manipulated words, pirating of cell-phone chatter and recorded combinations of whispers and physical movement.

Pamela Z's "Geekspeak," for example, is a witty gag, made of layered, looped clips of computer technicians trying to define "geek" and "nerd." Ann Hamilton and Andrew Deutsch's "First Line" remixes the sound of Ms. Hamilton drawing, a kind of music created by her unintelligible mumblings and scratching. The sound wizard Yasunao Toné, a 60's Fluxus artist and Merce Cunningham collaborator during the 70's, has produced a composition of dense complexity by messing around with a CD. And Jim O'Rourke has rearranged an eight-second sample of a quartet by John Cage into a miniature nocturne.

Duchamp once declared that art could be nothing more than breath on a pane of glass. Today his breath could be digitally transformed into music or sculpture. The breakdown between disciplines started years ago but has been hastened immeasurably. And as old boundaries disappear, new ones emerge, this time between operating systems and hardware. A new world.

"BitStreams" and "Data Dynamics" are at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, (212) 570-3676, through June 10.

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