14133 • 1985 NEWS GROUP PUBLICATIONS, INC.

the village VOICE

VOL. XXX NO. 15 THE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER OF NEW YORK APRIL 9, 1985 $1.00

PHOTO

New Spirit of Photography: Art and technology mesh in this fascinating show (organized by Patt Blue) of work employing computer, copier, teleprinter, radiograph, high voltage, Robot Slo-Scan, and Kirlian photography. The participants include Eric Staller, Mary Jo Toles, Walter Chappell, Ron MacNeil, Sheila Pinkel, Woody Vasulka, Sonia Sheridan, and Nancy Burson (who exhibits a computer assisted portrait of Etan Patz as he would look today). Through May 4, Artisan Space at FIT, Building E, 227 West 27th Street, 760-7642. (McDarrah)

ARTISANSPACE
Shirley Goodman Resource Center
Fashion Institute of Technology
227 West 27 Street, New York, NY 10001

PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW

ANDY GRUNDBERG

Images in the Computer Age

Once, photographs were the allies of truth. They seemed to show us reality itself, reflected in a flawless mirror. When the poet and critic Charles Baudelaire called photography "art's most mortal enemy," in 1859, he was inveighing against the medium's verisimilitude, its kinship with the world it depicted. "If it be allowed to encroach upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary... so much the worse for us!," he warned.

In the late 20th century we have finally learned to be aware of the hidden agenda of photographs. No longer do we see them as natural or even neutral depictions, but as images like any others, loaded with the implicit biases of their makers and of the culture from which they issued. Still, most of us continue to assume that images made with cameras automatically reflect a living, breathing world "out there," and not "the impalpable and the imaginary" realm valued by Baudelaire.

Now even that assumption has become outmoded. With new, computer-based technology, it is possible to produce photographic images that bear absolutely no connection to any external reality. The impact of this radical development has yet to make itself fully felt in public consciousness, but already photographers and other artists are beginning to recognize its meaning and to explore its potentials. For evidence, we need only look to "The New Spirit of Photography," a group show of "artists using advanced technology," at the Artisanspace Gallery of the Fashion Institute of Technology, and "Simulacra: Forms without Substance," an exhibition of computer-generated portraits by Nancy Burson at the International Center of Photography.

What distinguishes most of the pictures in these shows is that they are formed by digital, on-off impulses rather than by the smooth and seamless tonalities of conventional photographic processes. As a consequence, on close inspection they often look fuzzy, broken up or incomplete. They bear the same relationship to traditional photography that dot-matrix computer printouts bear to traditional typewriter pages, and on seeing them for the first time we may want to join Baudelaire in his woe-is-us lament.

But there also is quite a lot of esthetic head-scratching and artistic play at work on this technological frontier, which makes at least for a lively and invigorating atmosphere. At the Artisanspace show, not one of the 17 artists included duplicates the territory of anyone else. X-rays, teleprinters, high voltage discharges, Xerox machines and Fourth of July sparklers are among the means used to make these images. There's even a videotape, by Steina Vasulka, which documents the development of a home-grown computer device for manipulating still images on a video monitor.

Nevertheless, it has to be said that most of the so-called "advanced technology" art displayed to date is, for all its technical sophistication, rather elementary in impact. One sure sign that old esthetic concepts hold sway in the field is the form of presentation: for many people working in computer graphics, the goal still seems to be to produce a picture that fits the accepted definition of what a picture should look like. The situation today is not unlike that of video art in the early 70's: the potential of the technology has been grasped, but its relationship to the traditional arts has not yet been settled in a satisfactory way.

> Photography is on the edge of a brave new world.

Of the few artists who have managed to produce work that challenges the photography of the past, and that forces us to reconsider our notions of what images are and can be, perhaps the most provocative is Nancy Burson. Miss Burson's computer-generated "portraits," 18 of which are featured at ICP (there's one to be seen at Artisanspace as well), focus squarely on the issue of photographic truth. For, in fact, none of the people we see in these pictures is real. In collaboration with computer wizards Richard Carling and David Kramlich, the artist combines the faces of five movie stars into one "average" ideal face — or ten businessmen into one archetypal businessman, or a male and female torso into one "hermaphrodite." The images are achieved by what's described as "a patented facial warping system," but whatever the complexities of technology involved, the results are more than a bit eerie.

In some instances, Miss Burson seems merely to be having fun, as when she combines the face of a woman with that of a cat, and at other times she seems intent on making a political point, as in a series of "Warhead" portraits that combine the visages of the leaders of countries possessing nuclear weapons, statistically weighted by the number on warheads at each leader's disposal. Nowhere is the unsettling potential of her technique more explicit, however, than in an image called "Etan Patz Update." Etan Patz is the child who disappeared six years ago in Soho while on his way to school and has never been seen since. Miss Burson's portrait purports to show what he would look like today, at age 12. What we have here, in short, is a powerful new tool for creating likenesses of what does not exist, or can only be imagined. Its social and political consequences, left largely unexamined in these images, are not difficult to imagine. Already it has attracted interest outside the art world; the "Etan Patz Update," we are told, was commissioned by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

●

However tentative and esthetically unsatisfying much of today's high-technology art may seem, then, there is no use denying that we stand on the edge of a brave new world of image making — a world in which photography's last lingering claim to a privileged purchase on reality is summarily negated. Today, admittedly, we can still tell a conventional camera picture from a computerized one. But once the digitalized image's pixels have been reduced to infinitesimal size, the distinction will disappear. It will be up to photographers to find a way to invest their images with semblances of the real, since photographs will no longer convey them implicitly. And it will be up to photography's audience to devise new ways to distinguish the genuine.

"The New Spirit of Photography," organized by Patt Blue, can be seen at Artisanspace Gallery (227 West 27th Street, off Seventh Avenue) through May 4. Nancy Burson's "Simulacra," the first installment of a series called "New Directions" at the International Center of Photography (Fifth Avenue and 94th Street), was directed by guest curator William Ewing and remains on view through May 12. Another exhibition relating to computer art, but less focused on the photographic image, is "Emerging Expressions: The Artist and the Computer," at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (1040 Grand Concourse) through Sept. 22. ■

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, APRIL 14, 1985