

The artist in the machine

ART AND INNOVATION:

The Xerox PARC

Artist-in-Residence Program

Edited by Craig Harris

MIT Press

294 pages, \$35

A simple premise: The Grail is in The Machine. . . if we can just get artists and scientist to sit down and talk to each other. Roger F. Malina states in his foreword, "We are living in a world in which the arts, sciences, and technology are becoming inextricably integrated strands in a new emerging cultural fabric."

The 13 chapters in this compilation were written by artist/scientist pairings invited to participate in PAIR (PARC's Artist-in-Residence program) at Xerox PARC (Palo Alto Research Center) during the 1990s. The book at first seems a mishmash of personal notes, grant proposals, printouts of email exchanges, transcripts of over-beer conversations, with a lot of jargon-laced academic art-speak. The pages are shot to pieces with acronyms, which are a pain visually and aurally. The reviewer asks: Why can't our technical language delight our senses? Why are the digital images so crude? This is state-of-the-art from Xerox Corp.?

As for the content, the book reads as if the editor said to the writers, "Here's your 20 pages, fill 'em up somehow." No one has dealt with the overall theme and sequencing. There are several long descriptions of irrelevant or abandoned pieces, and too many repetitions of the PARC/PAIR proposition.

The premise, though, that art and science are merging is an improvement over the notion that art is becoming one with entertainment. Science relies on rigorous testing and thoroughness of investigation, which the innovative arts often overlook in a quest for the new. The art/science merger has a distinguished history: Bell Labs in the sixties, Billy Klüver and Robert Rauschenberg's Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) in

the early seventies, STEIM in Amsterdam, IRCAM in Paris, Ars Electronica in Austria, and our locals, the Santa Fe Institute, and Techne and Eros Art & Science Lab (Woody and Steina Vasulka, David Dunn, James Crutchfield). The idea that scientists should be allowed to pick the brains of artists to find out what machines might be useful could be termed "consumer-driven research." Initially, I found the concept disturbing, until I remembered that Guttenberg's

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Several chapters "reek of the lamp" with pedantic, technohype manifestos, and self-referential, ingrown justifications for plans gone awry. Profferation permeates. How do you feel about interactive-hypertext detective novels in multi-person MUD spaces, collaborative narratives based on strings of random word searches, anthropologists videotaping artists sitting around trying to figure out what they're going to do?

Read Gertrude Stein's *What Are Masterpieces and Why Are There So Few of Them*. Personally I don't want to hear one more word about "returning the gaze." The thought arises that artists should refrain from explaining their work, except in court.

Philosophical constructs range from "allegorical thicknesses"

(something to hang your hat on), "error as muse," "appropriating oneself," to "the process is the program." A heated debate surfaces, "What is a document? What is a copy?" How about a little "being and nothingness."

Recently a composer friend of mine explained that 15 years ago, no one had any idea that the little box we use to write letters, print out resumes, and do our taxes could also store and play the most complicated synthesizers ever made. Whole rooms with tangled patch cables were once needed to get a fraction of the flexibility. Previously, he played reels backwards, stretched tape to get effects. Now with the little box, he can do almost anything. His music has improved. That's what PARC is after. A product is in the cards and in the contract.

Chapters that excite: Paul De Marinis, Pamela Z, Stephen Wilson, Rich Gold. Inspired minds, inventive writing. Quotes that provoke: "If you put creative people in a hothouse setting, innovation will naturally emerge." (Paris in the twenties?) "What artists fundamentally make are documents." (Xerox-speak.) "The primary concern of artists is to express themselves whereas the primary concern of scientists is to discover the truths of nature." (Artists also get at truths.) "The arts can function as an independent zone of research." (Does art "function?") "They could make a giant jellyfish and get all the way to Mars." (Now we're talking.) "I regard technology as the meeting ground of the physically possible with the humanly desirable." (Nice and neat.)

Clearly the PARC/PAIR program is a valuable and vital focus but its documentation in book form feels padded and premature.

Melody Sumner Carnahan

A fiction writer who collaborates with artists and composers, Sumner Carnahan's most recent book/audio CD is *The Time Is Now*. Her texts as audioworks are included in the Whitney's exhibition, *American Century 1950-2000*.

Books