

The Computer Arts Society and Computer Arts Archive

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Abstract

This short paper describes the work of the Computer Arts Society and affiliated Computer Arts Archive CIC.

Keywords

Media art archives, Computer Arts Society, Computer Arts Archive CIC, ISEA Physical Archive, preservation, documentation.

The Computer Arts Society (CAS) was founded in 1968 after preliminary meetings at both IFIP 68 (the International Federation for Information Processing annual conference) and Cybernetic Serendipity. The three founders were Alan Sutcliffe, John Lansdown and George Mallen. The original mission of the society was to introduce creative workers to the potential of the computational meta-medium. At that period of time computers were still pretty rare and access to them was limited. A hands-on lab. was established at IRAT (Institute for Research into Art & Technology aka The Robert Street Art's Lab.) by John Lifton and consisted of a mechanical teletype linked via audio-coupler and telephone line to the Atlas computer at Rutherford Lab. – the UK government's supercomputer facility. In 1969 CAS began publishing their bulletin PAGE with Gustav Metzger as its first editor. A complete set of PAGE is available and along with other archival material it exists as a useful research tool for the early days of the field [1].

By the mid-1980s, the personal computer had arrived and the society ran out of steam. Then in 2002 an AHRB-funded project at Birkbeck, University of London called CACHE (Computer Arts – Contexts, Histories, etc...) began to research early developments in the field and as a consequence, CAS was re-established in 2004. Because computers were by then ubiquitous its mission was changed to focus on documentation and preservation. Important outcomes of CACHE included two books [2][3] as well as the donation of two international archives to the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) [4][5]. The revitalised CAS consolidated its online presence with an email listserv, web page and more recently has been active in social media with a Facebook presence, Instagram page and YouTube channel.

Throughout its existence CAS has been generously supported as a Specialist Group (SG) of the BCS (British

Computer Society – the UK's Chartered Institute for IT). This is composed of financial support for CAS' core programme as well as one-off grants for special events like CAS' Annual EVA – Electronic Visualisation and the Arts – Conference and regular exhibitions. Their current annual programme consists of 11 monthly talks and presentations, four small 20-print exhibitions and two larger exhibitions as well as EVA and other special events. Since the advent of Covid it has made use of the high-capacity BCS Zoom facility which has enabled the participation of its international community of members. Most in-person events take place at the BCS's prestigious central London HQ in the financial district just behind the Bank of England. Exhibitions are also held there before touring to or from other venues. Most events are recorded for the CAS YouTube channel.

The Computer Arts Society website (www.computer-arts-society.com) has also been significantly updated over the past three years. As well as providing links to a collection of almost 300 talks and videos, it contains extensive documentation of the recent exhibition programme, as well as a growing archive of earlier CAS activities and PDF copies of PAGE and other publications.

In 2023 the society was honoured when Jasia Reichardt agreed that we could use her name for a new lecture series. The CAS Jasia Reichardt Annual Lecture will be given by a prominent member of the community. The first instantiation was in January 2024 when Jasia herself talked about her work at the ICA during which she curated the memorable Cybernetic Serendipity exhibition.

The BCS charitable status and constitution governing their SGs prevent CAS from holding its own assets, seeking independent finance or raising funding and support from other philanthropic sources. For this reason, in 2020 the management committee of CAS decided to establish an independent not-for-profit community interest company called The Computer Arts Archive CIC (CAA) [6]. At the time of writing, the Computer Arts Archive is based in temporary premises in the centre of Leicester. However, it is in the process of being moved to De Montfort University in Leicester. This will give the archive museum-quality storage facilities, plus access to those wishing to view the holdings. The intention is to use this new base to raise the profile of the Computer Arts Archive and to instigate national and international research projects.

Current projects associated with the Computer Arts Archive include a collaboration to rebuild an EMS Synthi-100 built by CAS founder member Peter Zinovieff and a project to restore and display a 1980s Quantel Paintbox system. The

archive also contains almost 100 prints and artworks by many of the early pioneers of the field including Harold Cohen, Ernest Edmonds and Paul Brown – who have all received the prestigious ACM/SIGGRAPH Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement in Digital Art – Peter Beyls, Brian Reffin-Smith – winner of the first Prix Ars Electronica – and many others. It also includes other collections including Micro Arts, the EVA Conference Archive, the Edward Ihnatowicz archive and the ISEA Physical Archive (which is in the process of being catalogued). The Archive also publishes exhibition catalogues on behalf of the CAS and several artists have donated print series that the CAA can use for fundraising.

The Archive has also instigated a series of functional rebuilds of pioneering computer artworks. The first of these was a facsimile of Ernest Edmonds' early 1970s artwork "Communication Game" [7]. This was followed by a rebuild of Stephen Scrivener's 1970s "Homeostasis" piece, which was exhibited in Sydney in early 2023 [8]. This area of work is proving interesting and the Archive will be continuing to work with computer art pioneers to recreate lost early work

using contemporary technology. This is a significantly different route than the collections who attempt to keep artworks alive using their original technology. A key concern here is the intention of the artist – where the artist is alive and can supervise the work reconstructions can convey the original artwork with integrity. If the artist is no longer available then simulations that endeavour to emulate the precise behaviour of the earlier technology are essential.

The CAA has significantly enhanced the ability of the CAS to broaden the scope of its activities and offers new opportunities to document, preserve and contextualise work in the field. Leicester was one of the major UK hubs in the early computer arts (along with the Slade School of Art, University College London) and a recent exhibition features many of the pioneers who were associated with the city. The CAA organises exhibitions and talks in the city and many of the CAS exhibitions tour to and from the Phoenix Arts Centre there.

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Authors Biographies

Sean Clark is an independent artist, curator, and researcher based in Leicestershire, UK. In 2016 was co-winner of the Lumen Prize for 3D/Sculpture and the Art.CHI Digital Art Prize.

Paul Brown is an artist and writer. In 2023 he received the ACM/SIGGRAPH Distinguished Artist Award for Lifetime Achievement in Digital Art