

Perhaps the most alarming aspect of the recent explosive mushrooming of "high tech" computer technology and its advertising, both as it impacts on culture and on cultural thinking is the unseemly haste of its acceptance and its assimilation. In such a whole-hearted endorsement and total, joyful embracing can the impact be perceived and understood before it is felt? What effect will the computer age have upon our thinking and our decision making? In what ways, apart from the obvious, will it change the apparatuses of cultural control?

Ellen Ramsey would appear to be one of those artists who think that the meaningfulness of art is to make visible the social contradictions framing its own medium and "embody the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure" (Adorno). Calling themselves (or fitting into the category of) cultural artists, these analysts would hold that, to be valid, art about or generated by computers must, of necessity, address such cultural questions.

It is questions such as these that Ramsey approaches in *Scanning for Recognizable Constructs*. The work consists of three deliberately separate panels mounted on three walls of the space framed by the gallery, the gallery's fourth wall being its "picture window" out onto the street.

The first panel, and one of three interconnecting pieces, consists of three sheets of blackline prints. Running in a line down the entire length of the panel, is a series of 35mm negatives reproduced onto each sheet, exposing, if you will, images of both male and female subjects, randomly interspersed. The posturings and positions are rigid, erect and upright, yet somehow natural, as if each was posing for some kind of personal data passport — height, weight, hair colour, distinguishing marks, etc. The homogeneity of the poses and the effacing of their representation by their negative reproduction turns the succession of images into a continuum, a statistical recording of individuals and individuality, so repetitious as to be constant and, therefore, somehow meaningless, viewed, as it must be, by a walking audience passing along the length of the panel to reach the end of the line.

The second panel, *Interface*, is itself, two separate panels, each on glossy blue transit text with images constructed of acetate screen and consisting of grid-like dots and squares. An expressionistic image, somewhat crudely and primitively rendered, respectively male and female, is silhouetted in shades of grey and black on each. The shapes are indistinct and distorted, displaying their sex more by curves and shapings than by faithfulness. Moreover, the

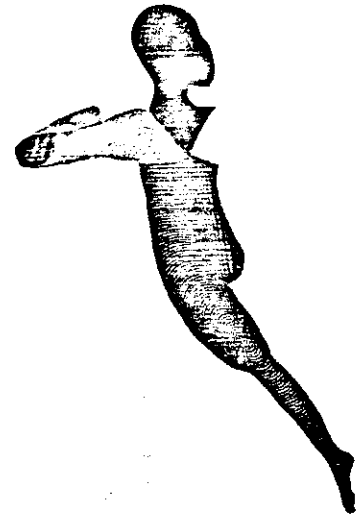
grid effect of the images echoes the individual trapped in the capitalist matrix of computer technology. While their gestures are vaguely stereotypical: the male running, strong, but yet looking back, the female frozen with one hand held up as if blocking the technology. Both clash with and are antithetical to the flawless and perfect images actually created by the technology.

In that sense, Ramsey's use of codes, is blurred and ambiguous, unlike the clear perpetuation of masculine/feminine ideology inherent in today's culture. One wonders whether her intent refers to the new signifiers of the future or whether the signifier itself is nothing more than a dialectic between a strong but wary and intellectually reflective male and hesitant and feminine female. Ramsey's ignoring of the codes of the computer and its language reminds one of Barthes' view that photographs (read computers) convey messages without analysing them. However, whether an attempt to discuss the cultural framework of any medium while neglecting the codes of that medium ends in self-repudiation is not, perhaps the question.

The third and final panel (four standard-size panels glued) is, again reflectively glossy, this time in "basic" black. In the centre of this constructed panel (4½' x 5½') is a comic-book styled video control stick or *Joystick* — the panel's title — constructed of coloured paper and grease-pen drawing. In bright primary colours, the *Joystick* appropriates advertising/graphic design imagery, in a manner reminiscent of Warhol's factory reproduction which, of course, refers directly to advertising its commodities, and to their distribution. (Ramsey only makes one *Joystick*). As such, it suggests, even if faintly, its artistic roots, while speaking, very clearly, of a phallogocentric, male-dominated order of cultural control.

The work directly addresses the issues of how it is that computer generated cultural models and reproductions in advertising (and therefore within the realities of culture) affect culture's decision/control mechanisms, particularly as those mechanisms differentiate between men and women.

In attempting to articulate those issues, *Scanning...* requires, and explicitly so, the gallery, in its traditional role, in order to permit the perceptual experience of receiving the messages of all panels at once. That simultaneity constitutes the scanning, imposed on or undertaken by the viewer and is one which the work itself claims as its message. If there is a weakness in that approach, it lies in the fact that the frame of the work, in this case, the gallery, can, by means of disruption, connote meaning. Ramsey does not seem to remain oblivious to that theatricality; rather, she chooses to ignore it.



Ellen Ramsey, *Interface* (1984), acetate screens on transit text 51.6 x 61 cm, (each panel) courtesy: the artist

Above all, the work speaks, artistically, of technique and, symbolically, about power. Whether its message, which seems, deliberately, to avoid a confrontational dialectic, despite its obvious use of collage and montage, advocates a new perspective or merely poses as a comment prompting awareness is a more difficult question. One suspects that, despite all the inherent difficulties of the theatricality of the absorption of the viewer into his/her own response to that question and the work, uniquely situated as that response much be in time and circumstance, that that is precisely the search, an internal scanning for recognizable constructs, that Ramsey intended the viewer to embark on.

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