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## Cybernetic Serendipity

Friday, Oct. 04, 1968

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Can computers create? Maybe not, but many of their programmers have a lot of fun trying to make them behave as if they could. Some technicians feed a set of numbers into the computer which activates a mechanical arm which in turn plots designs on paper. Photographs, too, can be analyzed and stored in a computer's memory, then reorganized and distorted on electronic command.

The results are often tantalizing facsimiles of op and pop. In addition, computers can be programmed to direct kinetic sculptures through any number of varied cycles.

Indeed, so widely has the computer's brain been applied to esthetic pursuits that London's Institute of Contemporary Art has mounted an entire exhibit devoted to "Cybernetic Serendipity." In seven weeks, it has packed in 40,000

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London art lovers, schoolboys, mathematicians and Chelsea old-age pensioners, and from admissions alone has all but recouped its \$45,000 cost.

Frog to a Phoenix. Visitors are caught up in a carnivalesque March of Progress from the moment they enter. At the door, they find that their bodies have been sighted by an electric eye, which in turn triggers the computer-generated voice that welcomes them in a deep monotone. They may be approached by R.O.S.A. (Radio Operated Simulated Actress) Bosom, a roving electronic robot who actually appeared with live performers in a 1966 London production of *The Three Musketeers* (R.O.S.A. played the Queen of France).

On the walls hang graceful, abstract designs that look like snail shells, plus computer variations on op designs by Jeffrey Steele and Bridget Riley. Ohio State University's Charles Csuri, a painter turned programmer, employs EDP (Electronic Data Processing) to sketch funhouse-mirror distortions of Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of a man in Vitruvian proportions. Japanese Engineer Fujio Niwa has produced a computer portrait of John F. Kennedy that converts a photograph into a series of dashes, all of which converge with sinister impact on the left ear.

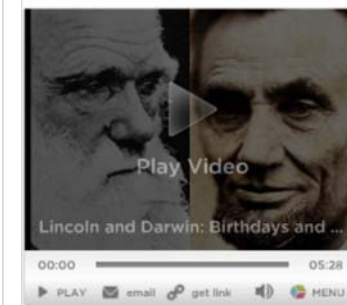
From the ceiling hangs a huge mobile by Britain's Gordon Pask that responds electronically to lights flashed on it by visitors. Wen Ying Tsai's sonically activated bed of strobe-lit steel rods sways to each clap of the viewer's hands. Taped sounds of computer-composed music fill the air, and computer-made poetry is on view. Some of it reads rather like *Alice in Wonderland* as rewritten by Charles Olson.

One Hand Clapping. Even at its best, the show proves not that computers can make art, but that humans are more essential than ever. For each of the drawings, a detailed program, painstakingly prepared by a human, was needed; the computer did no more than fill in the requested dots and lines. No genuinely

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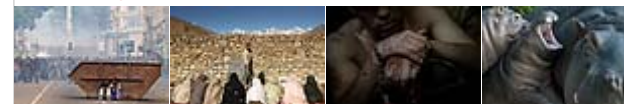
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observant viewer could ever confuse a vibrant Riley or a vertigo-inducing Steele painting with the computer's dry, mechanical variants on the original works. And, elaborate though Tsai's kinetic sculpture may be, it too needs a human, in fact two: one to build it and one to clap it into life in the exhibition hall. EDP does not respond to ESP, and no esthetic results can be expected from the sound of one hand clapping.

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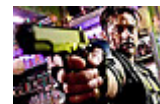
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