Art of Computers - Computers of Art

dr Samuel Mann
john van Dyk
peter Brook
School of Information Technology and
Electrotechnology
Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, NZ
smann@tekotago.ac.nz

In 2002, one of us, JvD, undertook research into the Art of Computers. In this dissertation were around fifty images of computers as art. Not images by computers or images using computers, but images OF computers. Despite its nature as an involved peice of academic writing, people who picked up the volume could not put it down. This was obviously an interesting subject matter, the question was: how to make it more accessible? In the back of John's book is a two page text

uncertainty about a machine that thinks, enslaves and possibly replaces humans while all the time appearing as a tool to end all tools. In recent years ideas of interactivity and virtual worlds have been added to the artistic picture. As the computer becomes "ossified" into the culture (Penny 1995), and the technology becomes invisible - the new iMac is decidedly an appliance, and Honda's ASMIO walks and talks - it will become harder to maintain this timeline, not because of a lack of material, it seems set to explode, but as the lines become blurred as computers and humans continue to co-evolve.

Penny, S. (1995). Consumer culture and the technological imperative: the artist in dataspace.
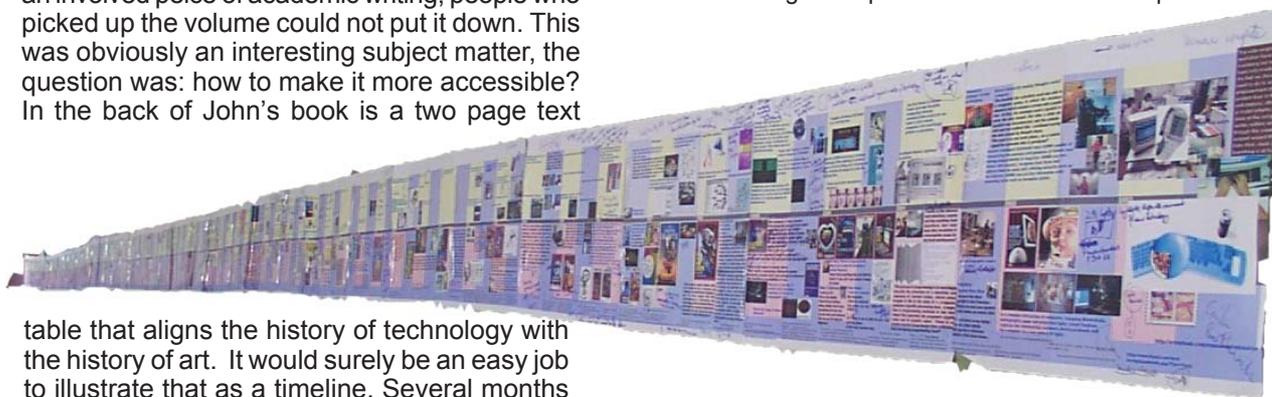
table that aligns the history of technology with the history of art. It would surely be an easy job to illustrate that as a timeline. Several months and 15 metres later we have a poster that we hope will prompt much recognition, discussion and perhaps, understanding.

The timeline consists of two sections, a history of computers from Sumerian tablets and Stonehenge on the top line; the concurrent artistic representations along the lower half. Initially we were strict about what counted as computers or art, but as the project progressed and more and more exceptions found their way onto the timeline, the rule became "if it's interesting, put it on". Hence, computing is represented by all manner of intelliegent machines, from toasters to cray super-computers, along with the concurrent developments in tools: watches, typewriters, calculators and underlying technology: mathematics, electricity, transistors and chips. Similarly, artefacts of the fine arts are joined by literature, lyrics, advertising, cartoons, magazine covers, film, stamps, media coverage and, interestingly, magic tricks.

In the late 1700s two long standing rules were broken. Machines couldn't think and people couldn't fly. But in 1783 the Montgolfier brothers flew and the automaton "Turk" beat all the best chess players in Europe. One of them was a trick, a piece of artistry, but it set minds thinking, including Babbage's. Since then computing has had a place in art, not through any percieved beauty of the objects, but as a result of our

in Penny S. (ed) Critical issues in electronic media. New York, SUNY Press: 47-73.

Standage, T. (2002). The mechanical Turk: The true story of the chess-playing machine that fooled the world. London: Penguin Press

van Dyk, J., Mann, S., Brook, P. (2003)Images of computers: a prehistory, hopes and fears realised? NACCQ (this volume)