Poster paper in the 20th Annual NACCQ, Mann, S. & Bridgeman, N. (eds) Nelson NZ, July 8-11 2007 www.naccq.ac.nz

Computer:Art timeline shows nostalgia and continuing fears

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Much has changed since the first outing of the Art of Computers:Computers of Art poster at NACCQ in 2002. The poster is three panels longer and several revisions have seen the density of information increase by at least 50% along its length.

This poster presents a timeline which consists of two sections, a history of computers from Sumerian tablets and Stonehenge on the top line; and concurrent artistic representations along the lower half. Computing is represented by all manner of intelligent machines, from toasters to Cray super-computers, along with 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 many of the best chess players in Europe. One of these 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 perceived beauty of the objects, but as a result of our 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 iMac is decidedly an appliance, and Honda's ASIMO walks and talks - it will become harder to maintain this timeline, not because of a lack of material as it seems set to explode, but because the lines become blurred as computers and humans continue to co-evolve.

The timeline aims to consider the fusions and fault lines between its two sections. In some cases the art follows the technological development, responding to new challenges or sometimes reflecting additions to the culture. In others, the art predates the technology, sometimes for a short time, and the technology follows, inspired perhaps by the art. On occasion, the art represents an unrealised future.

In the past four years some visions have been fleeting such as warchalking, or Julian Beever's anamorphic chalkings. Sustainability and issues of eWaste appear in Chris Jordan's "Intolerable Beauty". Perhaps the most obvious trend is one of the direction of artistic inspiration – instead of the long-held questions based on the future of computing (visions of worlds dominated by futuristic robots), the history of computing is now dominating. Retrospective imagery mixes a nostalgia tinted view – perhaps for a world less complicated – with a pervasive and persistent dehumanising machine.

Full timeline on http://bitweb.tekotago.ac.nz/compart/