



Jonathan Harris

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Simon Penny

Simon Penny began working with electromechanical and audiovisual technology in the context of performance, installation, and sculpture in the 1970s and early 1980s, before the ready availability of personal computers. At that time he constructed large-scale indoor and outdoor works that were mechanically or electrically activated in response to either the viewer or something in the environment. His switch from electromechanical to electronic systems permitted him to apply the more sophisticated programming capabilities of digital technology to his work, increasing the possibilities of processing stimulus and response behavior in the ongoing relation between viewer and work. A work like his 1985 *Shy TV* (fig. 2) integrates sensor inputs with various outputs: the actions of a flashing sign, a small color television, and a motorized base were triggered from passive infrared sensors, thus allowing a range of behaviors to be stimulated.

Although intrigued by the potential of electronic technology to create complex relations between the viewer and the robotic object, Penny was also aware that the move from mechanical to digital had implications for the aesthetic dimension. The crux of this issue was that the formal properties of machines intimately linked the perception of them as objects (with all the modernist appreciation of machine aesthetics) to a visual comprehension of their functional logic. With electronic technology, much of the “working” of the piece occurred at a spatial and temporal scale apart from human perception. Thus, to build in any kind of interactivity, the electronic artwork must respond in a human time scale, yet the computational workings, hidden from the viewer, are functioning at minute scale and blinding speed. Faced with this dilemma—that the functionalist/formalist rules of modern aesthetics could not be realized within an electronically operated artwork—Penny began to seek a different aesthetic basis for structuring his work. In his current projects, he attempts to articulate an “aesthetics of behavior” through interactive robotic works, such as *Petit Mal* (1992–95; see Kac, fig. 10) in which a real-time response to visitor behavior is manipulated as an artistic variable.

The technological exigencies of *Petit Mal* aptly demonstrate the difficulties of trying to optimize the robot’s viability while working within the demanding constraints of its basic design needs. *Petit Mal* was designed to wander freely in an indoor environment for eight hours a day over a period of four to six weeks. (By contrast, research robots often survive only for periods between ten seconds and fifteen minutes.) Penny attempted to determine the absolute minimum requirements for mobility, stability, power, and sensory interactive capability: sensors for body heat, two

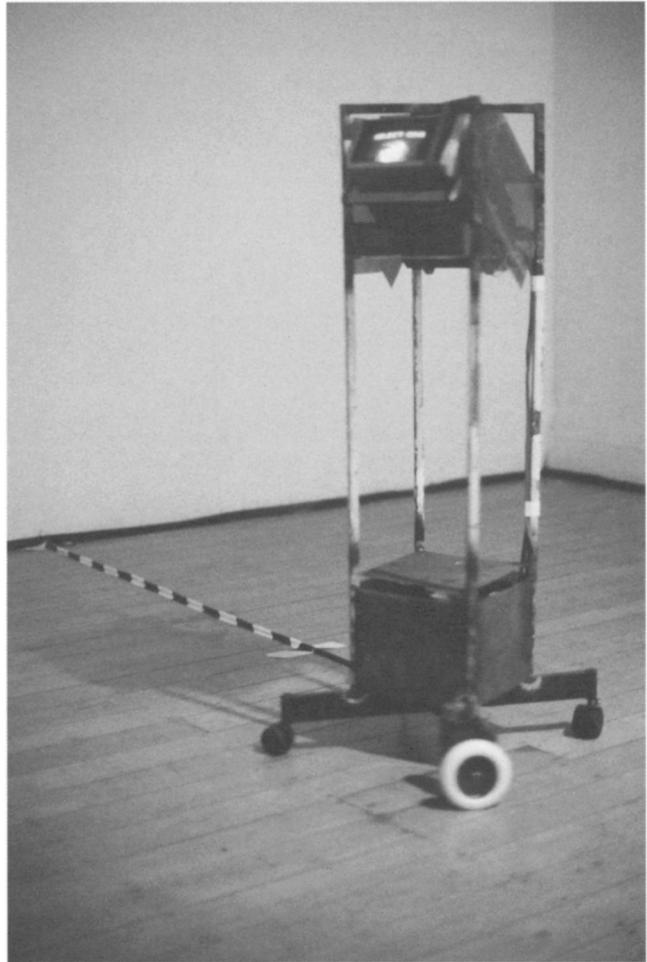


FIG. 2 Simon Penny, *Shy TV*, 1985, Courtesy the artist.

wheels (each with its own motor), a relatively small-scale microprocessor, lead-acid batteries as both power source and counterweight, a self-stabilizing double-pendulum structure so that the robot can stop, lean forward, right itself, accelerate, and lean back in a manner that engages the viewer with at least a hint of the anthropomorphic identity essential to robots’ social believability. Penny eschews the anthropomorphic clichés of form in favor of a more subtle attention to approximating social behavior, thereby attempting to reconcile the pedantic and logical nature of the machine with the nondeterministic perceptual behavior of human beings in a single, interactive work.

Jonathan Harris

Jonathan Harris is engaged with new technology primarily through his work as an educator, but he has also been producing series of works using digital manipulation of texts and images. The first series featured photographs



FIG. 3 Jonathan Harris and Terry Bolam, from *Emotional Virgins: From Jon to Jonathan and Back Again: A Series of Prints*, 1996. Courtesy the artists.

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from his childhood, and the second, Super-8 film transferred to video. The former consists of twelve large photographs of himself with his wife and children on a holiday in Kos in 1994 (*fig. 3*). These were family snapshots blown up to a large scale accompanied by the text of a letter his therapist had advised him to write to his dead parents about his feelings for them. This was both graphically and semantically “enlarged,” made clearer, and the images and text were exhibited in tandem. In the second work, the Super-8 video was manipulated digitally to focus on the “family-package” form of holiday travel he experienced as a child in a working-class British home. Recognizing the “microcultural imperialism” of such packaged vacations, and his own journey as a male child who traveled around the world in the 1960s and 1970s, Harris comments on the commodification of experience through the inherently class-based patterns of consumption. Taking advantage of the potential of software manipulations, he focuses and comments on features in the snapshots or original footage to create a critical emphasis. The poor quality of the original archival items sampled thus becomes part of the historical and cultural context of which it speaks, while the flexibility of the electronic environment permits the shaping of a critical dialogue between the visual and material characteristics of these texts.

As one of the faculty helping to organize a new program at Keele University in Britain that combines history, theory, and art practice (founded with fellow art historian and critic Francis Frascina), Harris has been concerned with the ways new technologies can promote a rethinking of the concept of the ideological mythology of artist and artwork. The degree at Keele is offered at the undergraduate level as an honors program in the visual arts in combination with an academic department, and at the graduate level as a master’s in visual arts in contemporary culture; it can be pursued either as a theory-only course or as a combination of theory and studio practice.

Paul Zelevansky

Paul Zelevansky’s creative engagement with electronic media crosses disciplinary lines between artistic practice and pedagogic concerns. While designing several interactive educational media presentations for museums, Zelevansky became keenly aware of the problems of how interface design relates to content structure and, by extension, the larger questions concerning audience. He realized that his assumptions about a viewer’s reception of a work—especially of an electronic piece—affect the entire structure of its form and narrative, and he began to focus on the ways in which viewers might grasp the designer’s graphic and thematic intentions in their own experience of the work. In the course of various on-site user evaluations, the discrepancy between the designer’s idea of what an “ideal” viewer would get from the experience and the actuality of a real encounter became apparent, and this caused him to reflect on the “performative” dimension of graphic design as communication. His commitment to a dialogic structure has emerged from this realization. He tries to anticipate a series of exchanges and responses to his work and incorporate these into the basic structure of an exhibit like *The Human Immune System* (1991; *fig. 4a, b*), an early interactive computer installation. This project, developed for the New York Hall of Science, utilized various animations and simulations to introduce the viewer/participant to the biological processes underlying the immune system and the conditions of health and disease. Beyond engaging viewers with the individual graphic screens and thematic content, the challenge was to orient them to the overall structure and sequence of possibilities within the piece as a whole through various intuitive and already familiar logics.

Zelevansky’s earlier work was in artist’s books, where he explored the ways language systems, iconographic elements, and schematic narratives could produce a network of meaning outside conventional story structures. His concerns with fundamental issues of human communication and meaning were evident in such projects as *Shadow Architecture at the Crossroads* (Zartscorp, 1988) and *The Book of Takes* (Zartscorp, 1976), in which biblical and mythological frames of reference underpin a contemporary archive that functions as much as a sign system as it does as a classical narrative.