

# Digital display

Electronic symposium  
takes modern art off the wall  
and into the future

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## Tempo

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### 'Tern Touch' 1997

An installation by Jean Theisenbernd in which participants walk a forest path (right) to get personal objects on real geodes, triggering computer monitors to display images of birds at geodes' locations. At the Illinois Art Gallery through Oct. 24.



### 'Memory Grid' 1995

Washed and blurred pictures of family members



### 'No Formas, Per Formas'

(No Smoking, Please) 1997

Virtual reality-computer image by Ed Paschke in collaboration with MIT Laboratory artists: Stephen Hays, Ellen Sander and Janine Peas. At the Illinois Art Gallery through Oct. 24.



By Abigail Fortmeyer  
Special to the Tribune

**T**elephones, take flight! ISEART has come to town.

The invasion of the International Symposium on Electronic Art, hosted by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has already enlisted almost every cultural institution in town in a conspiracy to make art interactive via computers. And thousands of fresh recruits are joining the revolution from home on a Web site that lists dozens of exhibitions and programs in conjunction with the symposium.

You could run to the Cave to escape. But the Cave, open for demonstration at the University of Illinois at Chicago, will only immerse you in the interactive, three-dimensional computer environments called virtual reality.

You could continue with sanity and go see flat. But even flat are opening robotic devices, with the help of microcomputers, in Kenneth Rinaldo's installation at

# ISEA

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forums and special events are scattered across town in an unprecedented cyberspace festival showcasing contributions from more than 1,000 artists and scientists from countries around the world.

The art in general defies traditional boundaries between artist and viewer, with multimedia installations, virtual reality, CD-ROMs, computer terminals, robots, video, audio and other electronics.

"The role of these artists is one of creating sets of choices and people using the art to become active participants in it. That's a whole new relationship in art," says symposium chairman Glenn Decker, an associate professor at the School of the Art Institute. However, he added, thematic content rather than technological hype remains the bottom line for electronic art, as for all art.

Consider the Cave, a visualization triumph open to the public this week on the USC campus, where it was located at the Electronic Visualization Laboratory. The Cave offers walk-through virtual reality environments with projected images that not only wrap the walls and floor but respond to your every move.

"There are 30 Caves and Cave-like devices now worldwide, and Chicago has become the center for networking" through virtual-reality telecommunications, says laboratory co-director Tom Ichniowski.

Yet all the technological gadgetry is easily forgotten in the compelling images of Dancy artists have created for the Cave during ISEAT. One environmental navigates the spaces of the 17th Century masterpiece painting "Las Meninas" by Diego Velazquez. The

virtual journey goes behind the figures in the work, explores its historical context and enters a hidden passageway that exits from the painting to show video clips about 20th Century fascism. The slide float across Pablo Picasso's "Guernica," chosen because Picasso recognized subtle references to 17th Century Italian in Velazquez's work. A transparent floor divides the walking journey of the "Guernica" hall from a mirror-image collection of 11 tunnels. In the Cave, you can feel that you are walking on that floor while immersed in colliding images of beauty and apocalyptic horror.

"I want to use the computer technology to look at the past and establish connections between present and past," says filmmaker Richard Dyer, who created the work with artists Andrew Johnson and Christina Vasiliuk.

You can also journey through "Las Meninas" and other virtual environments on Immersedisks, or portable, single-screen stations designed by the Electronic Visualization Laboratory. These are operating at the USC's Gallery 400, 400 S. Froese St. (Entering the Cave proper, at 942 W. Taylor St., in free but requires a reservation; call 312.999-6114.)

"Electronic Immersions: Four Generations of Illinois Artists" at the Illinois Art Gallery, 100 W. Randolph St., and AHC Gallery, 1000 W. Illinois St., honor the Electronic Visualization Laboratory and co-director Dan Sandin with a historical perspective on electronic art. The exhibit documents pioneering computer special effects the lab created for the 1977 release of "Star Wars." In these days, artists and scientists had to invent the computer imaging tools they needed as they went along, says Sandin, himself an artist as well as a physicist.



Dan Sandin, co-director of the Electronic Visualization Laboratory, with an early image processor he invented in 1972. Many of its functions are now duplicated in commercial software.

At the Illinois Art Gallery location, PHSColograms, made by (Act) Laboratory, Evanston, hang on the wall like conventional art but create 3-D virtual Illusions that seem to follow the every move of those who pass them. Michael Markowski's "Imagination Park" offers a grid of illusions for spectacular "flight" through stunning animated landscapes and spinning tunnels.

Joan Truckenbrod's "Town

Touch" creates a physical forest where she invites participants to leave behind a real object, plowing it to the grass cloth caught in a barbed wire fence that separates her forest path from computer monitors. Stepping along the path triggers images on the monitors that show hands touching the grass.

Truckenbrod says she is attempting to reconnect the computer to the real world.

"The whole computer experience is synthetic," says the artist. "The question is, How do we rematerialize it?"

Other artists at the Chicago Cultural Center apply this same blend of simple objects and high-tech applications to harmonize computer technology and nature. In Rinaldo's piece, microcomputers respond to the motion of Siamese fighting fish by activating robotic arms that move the entire fish bowl in the direction the fish are swimming. "The primary philosophy here is that technology needs to look to natural systems for modeling, to look for a seamless integration between natural and technological form," Rinaldo says.

An installation by symposium chair Decker creates an audio "chandelier" made of metal paint stirrers that softly click with changing patterns of sounds that resemble chirping birds. The rhythmic flow of sound and motion when standing at the center of the installation provides a meditative oasis from the cacophony of technology in general.

There's lots more electronic art just down the street at the Betty Rymer Gallery of the School of the Art Institute, Columbus Drive and Jackson Boulevard. The official ISEA97 exhibit opens Wednesday and occupies two floors of the school's building at 847 W. Jackson St., with 10,000 square feet of space devoted to four moving robotic works alone. The exhibit is open through Saturday. At the same location, "Beyond Shelter: The Architecture of the Future" brings together virtual and physical installations and "Hybrid" offers an eclectic sampling of student work. The school is also playing host to a "video multimedia block party" open to the public at Eckhart Park, 1300 W. Chicago Ave., from noon to 11 p.m.

Saturday.

The eighth annual symposium, held in a different place each year, is an academic conference for sharing new directions in electronic media and grappling with the aesthetic and social issues it raises about communication and human interaction. The conference also features workshops on subjects such as 3-D animation, creating "hyper-spaces" (spaces with links to digital media) and digital sound systems.

Honorary ISEA97 chairwoman Laurie Anderson kicks off the symposium Tuesday night with performance art and high-tech storytelling about her vision of future shock. On Wednesday, clinical psychologist Sherry Turkle delivers a keynote address that looks at the impact of the multiple personas people create to participate in on-line games or fantasy communities. Turkle is author of the book "Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet."

You need to be a symposium registrant to attend either of these events, but lots of other special attractions are open to the public and many are free. Host institutions include the Harold Washington Library, the Museum of Contemporary Art and Randolph Street Gallery.

More details are available through the ISEA97 Web site ([www.artic.edu/~isea97](http://www.artic.edu/~isea97)), by calling 312-345-3602, and by visiting the conference central headquarters at 112 S. Michigan Ave. To register for workshops or the full symposium, call 312-890-5170.

*Freelance writer Abigail Foerster, a frequent contributor to the Chicago Tribune, wrote a brief historical essay that appears in the catalog to "Electronic Immersions: Four Generations of Illinois Artists."*