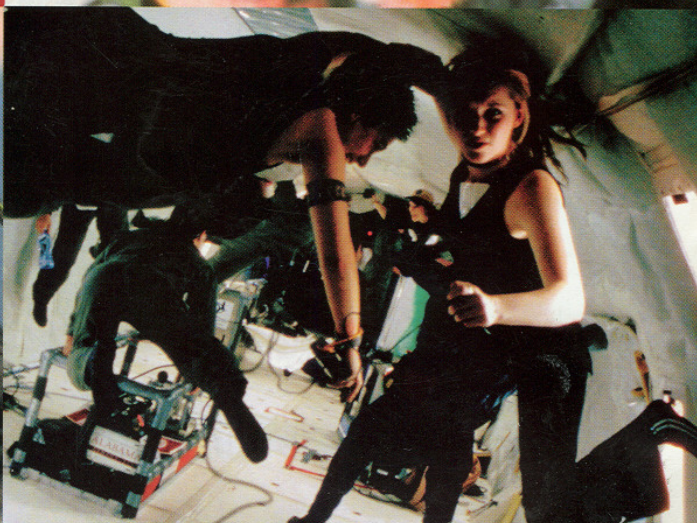
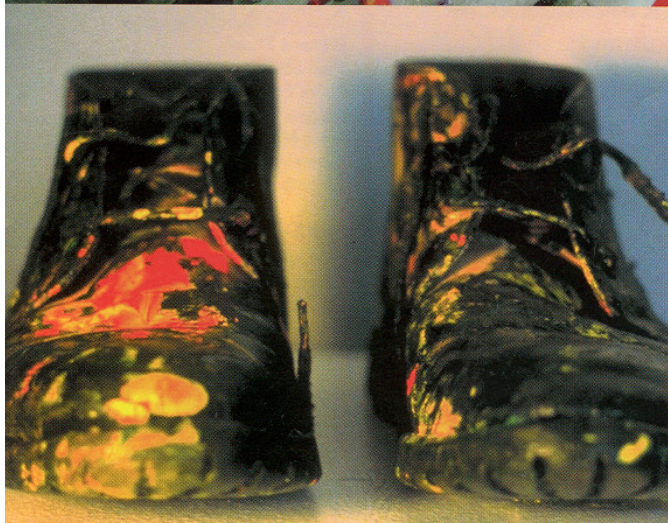
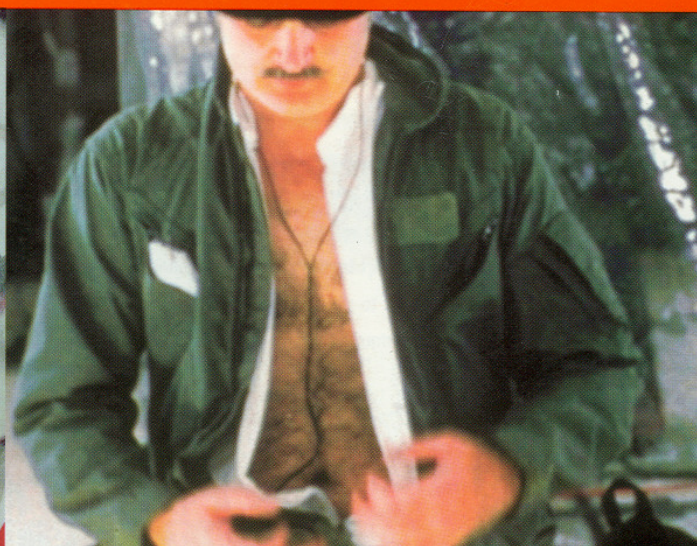


FALL 1998  
Vol. 2, No. 1

SAN FRANCISCO **ART** INSTITUTE

a magazine of art, ideas and information





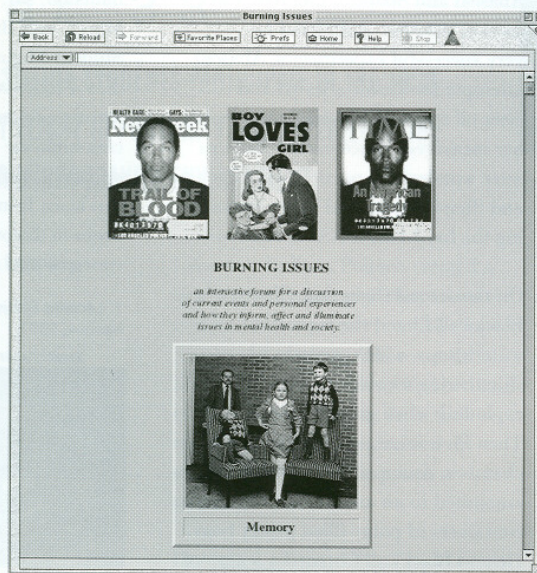
# The Aesthetics of DIGITAL Media:

A Conversation with Margaret Crane, Ken Goldberg and Randall Packer

page 4: Margaret Crane  
/Jon Winet *Burning Issues*  
from General Hospital

page 5 left: Randall Packer,  
Arches Music Theater

right: Ken Goldberg, visiting  
faculty, [telegarden.aec.at](http://telegarden.aec.at)



At the end of the 19th century debate flourished about the artistic value of the relatively new medium known as photography. Today, as we reach the new millennium, the newest technology to be taken up by artists—computers—are stirring a similar debate. Artists Margaret Crane, Ken Goldberg and Randall Packer create work that is viewed or produced through a computer. In early June, Paul Klein, the director of the San Francisco Art Institute's Center for Digital Media, sat down with them to discuss the aesthetics of digital media. What follows is a portion of that conversation. If you'd like to read the entire interview log on to [www.sfai.edu/cdm/mediatheory](http://www.sfai.edu/cdm/mediatheory).

**Paul Klein:** *The technical components of digital media, have transformed categories that are central to traditional artistic production, such as beauty, skill, form and content. How do you ease the fears of artists and curators who adhere to the established boundaries and categories associated with modernism?*

**Randall Packer:** I think in a way it's up to artists to develop new ideas and do new work that's powerful

which shows the expressive possibility of new media. The dissolution of the object terrifies museum people.

**Margaret Crane:** I think the notion of beauty, skill, form and content doesn't disappear. The same things for doing a painting or installation should be kept in mind for digital media. What we find in digital media is made in the commercial world and it really doesn't have an art school and art historical background, and I think it's often impoverished. If you look on the Web or think about the world of games and interactive CDs, they are pretty ugly and content free. I think art students with their background really can bring to digital art a foundation of aesthetics and politics.

**Randall Packer:** I somewhat disagree. We have kind of a reversal where artists are sort of following the developments that are coming from the industry and coming from the commercial sector. I think that's a positive thing. It's collaborative and it's an exchange of ideas and technology.

**Ken Goldberg:** I think there is a distinction between just a gallery on the Web, where you're scanning in

images or making digital images with Photoshop and other tools versus conceptual works that really question the medium itself. That's where you get into the realm of more conceptual artwork which has been the grounding of 20th century art. I think there's a small but growing area of digital art which questions it's own foundation. They're not just using it as a tool. But I think there is still some potential for including the object in this realm.

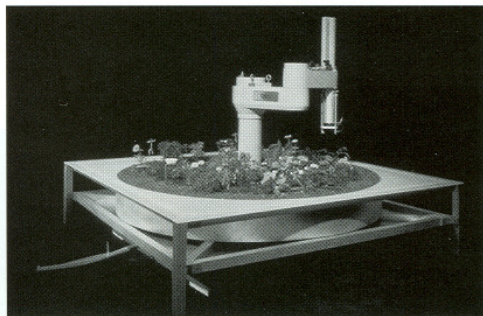
**Randall Packer:** The transformation of how new media's impacting galleries and museums is that the loss of the object is the loss of the gallery. You're dealing with light and your dealing with time, neither of which really make sense in the context of typical exhibition space. There is a collision between how we experience art in a digital domain and the physicality of exhibition space.

**Paul Klein:** *Digital art has been vulgar, formulaic, all effect/no substance and much worse. What role do you see for places like the Art Institute to motivate artists to work more substantially with digital media. Also, students tell me about "screen impotence." For some of them, screens are a distancing and containment medium for images. Since much work you do involves screen presentation, what do you think about this criticism?*

**Margaret Crane:** I wish digital media was more vulgar. It seems uptight and passionless. The vulgarity of modern life needs to be a part of digital media, more vibrant, more challenging, fleshier, grittier.

**Ken Goldberg:** I think most curators, museum goers, and artists look at the screen and just feel nothing, no attachment. But there are techniques for getting the body involved and having mechanisms at a distance





and having installations and performances that involve digital media, but also keep the body involved.

**Randall Packer:** With the advent of desktop media, the personal computer was designed as an office tool and there's this medium that has come out of something that was created in Xerox Parc for the paperless office. Suddenly, it's being used to create digital artwork. I think its very important to not let the media be dominated by the desktop reality.

**Paul Klein:** *For artists, the Internet promised open access, global exhibition space outside of traditional venues, collaborative art making and much more. All three of you are involved with art forms that use the Internet, why do you think it remains a viable space for artists even as it becomes more commercialized and mainstream?*

**Randall Packer:** I'd actually like to use Ken's *Telegarden* as an example of what I think really works on the Web. What is really exciting about the Web is that it has so much to do with the real world. It is like public space. The *Telegarden* encourages virtual community in an imaginative way and it uses the garden as a metaphor for bringing people together. Also, Jenny Holzer's *Please Change Beliefs* leverages itself on interaction, activity, and the people using it.

**Margaret Crane:** The idea of audience-targeted audiences, general audiences, how do you speak to people in a certain amount of time? This all works perfectly in an electronic environment.

**Ken Goldberg:** Web art is something that is open 24 hours a day and will stay up indefinitely and you see how many people are coming to see your work. And they'll leave comments. It's a great way to get a sense of how your work is being received.

**Paul Klein:** *With digital aesthetics now seeming to be in an ultra-realist mode, is "technology and the senses" an oxymoron? In other words, is expressive artmaking within technology still possible?*

**Margaret Crane:** Well, I guess I'm thinking about the Web sites my students make which I think are very expressive. They have an art background, but they were individual, they were funny, lots of emotional content as well as artistic content.

**Randall Packer:** In using technology, it's not really the technology, it's how the work engages people about issues that is what art's all about. But the other thing is that it is a new medium and requires a whole new set of aesthetics and new criteria for perception and understanding. I keep thinking about Maholy Nagy's work, *The Light Space Modulator*, which was created in 1930. It's considered to one of the first electronic works. It must have seemed like some mechanical thing, what does that have to do with art? It's such an engaging, beautiful, moving experience that it transcends its mechanical apparatus and becomes artwork.

**Ken Goldberg:** What the digital world needs to learn from places like the Art Institute is everything about aesthetics, about conceptual and theoretical issues—how to bring those

into play. I've just been rereading David King's book on beauty and those things are very important. Once you understand them you can reject them, but you can't just walk away without understanding them.

**Margaret Crane:** I've been thinking along those lines lately and I found myself really interested in reading about early 20th century filmmakers. I'm fascinated by D. W. Griffith and Eisenstein and people I hadn't thought about since I was an undergraduate. They were creating this incredible visual grammar that has lasted, and I don't think digital technology has that yet. Now it's a wonderful time and we will help conceptualize it.

**Ken Goldberg:** The art world tends to look at us as this ghettoized, freak phenomenon, and we should take the positive out of that marginalization. We are trying to find a voice in this medium and it's going to take some time.

Margaret Crane is an artist whose collaborative work with Jon Winet titled *Nightfall* recently was shown at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. She is a visiting artist who teaches in the New Genres Department and in the Center for Digital Media. To view her work log on to [www.pair.xerox.com/cw](http://www.pair.xerox.com/cw)

Ken Goldberg is an artist and Associate Professor of Industrial Engineering and Operations Research at the University of California, Berkeley. He will be teaching a graduate seminar at the Art Institute during the Spring 1999 semester. To view his work log on to [www.ken.goldberg.net](http://www.ken.goldberg.net)

Randall Packer is a multimedia artist and Director of Multimedia at the San Jose Museum of Art. He is a visiting lecturer in Digital Media in the Department of Art Practice at the University of California, Berkeley. To view his work log on to [www.zakros.com](http://www.zakros.com), or to view work at the San Jose Museum of Art log on to [www.sjmusart.org](http://www.sjmusart.org)

To view work created by San Francisco Art Institute students log on to [www.sfi.edu/cdm](http://www.sfi.edu/cdm)