

# Behold

## the Wondrous Machine

By Adam Eisenstat

VISUAL  
ARTS  
JOURNAL

School of Visual Arts Magazine | Spring 2003

Lauren Fleckman

Computer technology has by now moved into and transformed practically every niche in the worlds of both art and industry. The convenience, accessibility and immediacy offered by digital tools and techniques are the driving forces behind technology's overwhelming impact. The computer has certainly been a boon to artists, allowing them unprecedented ways to experiment, create and distribute their work. It can also be argued that the computer encourages artists to do work that is sloppy, conceptually weak and devoid of the traditional artistic verities of rigor, craft and — for lack of a better word — soul.

For SVA, which finds itself at the cutting edge of art education and continually makes upgrades to its facilities to correspond with the latest standards, it is not enough simply to offer the latest digital tools; instruction in the use of these implements must be taught in conjunction with the fundamental principles of art-making. In other words, the College is responsible for introducing students to the vast

possibilities of the computer within the context of a disciplined art education — one that instills traditional principles and techniques from B.C. (before computers).

### AN ENGINE OF POSSIBILITY

The computer has undoubtedly simplified many of the time-consuming and painstaking tasks that were necessary to produce even a rough draft of an artist's or designer's work. Since many of these tasks were more drudgery than creative, when automated solutions came along, they were widely accepted. In fact, technology was seen as a godsend.

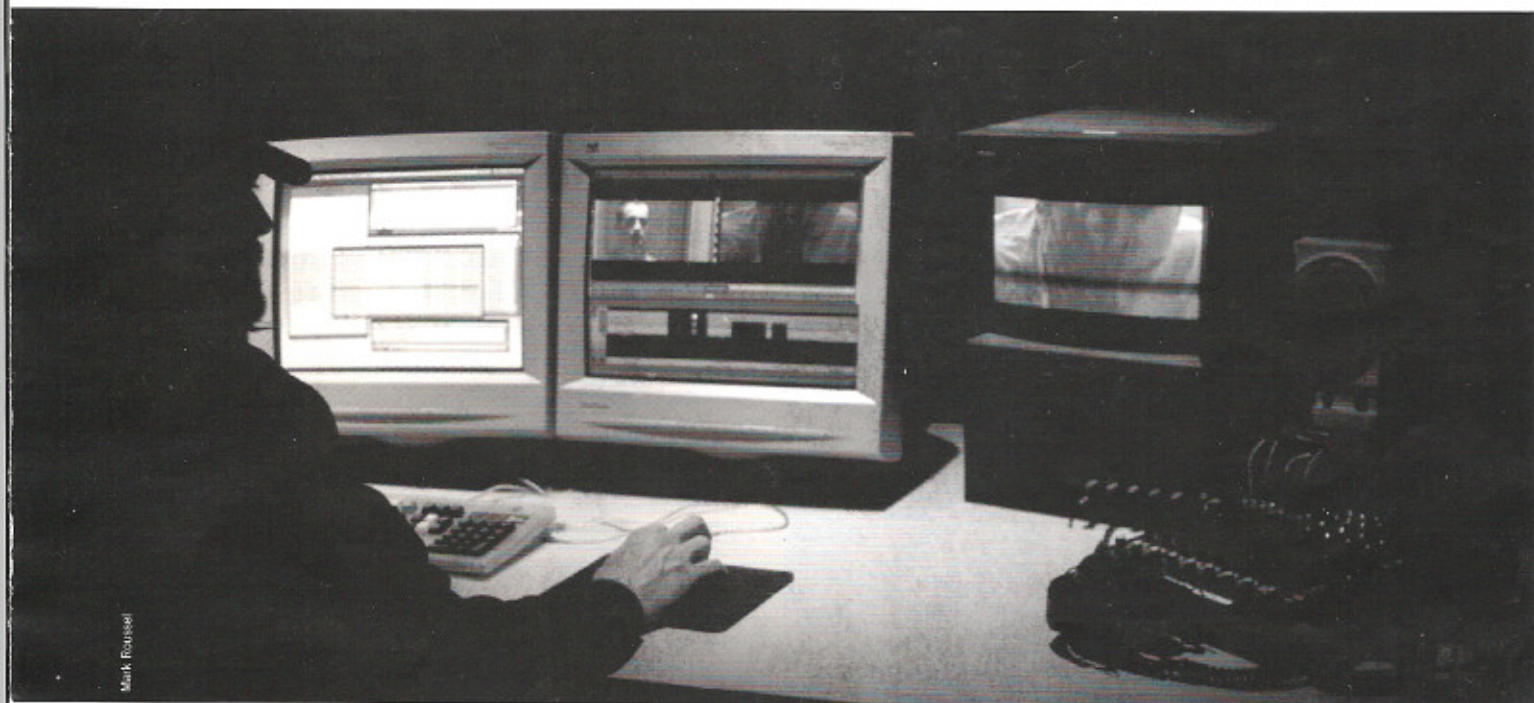
Graphic design, perhaps more than any other field, was totally transformed by the computer. In the old days, a basic concept was laid out with pencil or pastels (later, Magic Marker), followed by two or three rough drafts, or comps. Type, which had to be ordered from a type house (and reordered and reordered every time changes were made), was



sketched in by hand. Creating the design's final version was even more convoluted, with more intermediate steps needed. It was an ungainly process. Now, on the computer, one can easily create dozens of comps, easily experiment with multiple typefaces, and create a digital mechanical, all from the convenience of one's own desktop. Type houses, mechanical artists and other artifacts of the B.C. world are things of the past.

According to Richard Wilde, chair of the SVA Advertising and Graphic Design Department, the

Sal Petrosino, director of operations for the SVA Film, Video and Animation Department, echoes Richard Wilde: "Shooting digitally is much cheaper than film. This, of course, allows people to shoot more, and the more you do something, the better you become. Also, with digital video, you can see what the work looks like right while you're shooting it, which builds confidence and encourages experimentation." Film and video editing, which is now almost exclusively digital, has also become a markedly faster process. Not only that, but digital editing allows the editor to handle functions that previously required



computer not only simplifies the entire design process, it functions as an invaluable teaching tool. "The computer is great for training," says Wilde. "Because it gives you more possibilities for trial and error; you can make more mistakes from which to learn. When you're doing 50 comps rather than two or three, you can develop an aesthetic more quickly and get a much stronger sense of what works, what doesn't and why."

#### LET'S GO TO THE MOVIES

Digital video and digital editing have had a tremendous influence on the world of the moving image. Economics is a major factor behind this development, as the cost of film has long been prohibitively expensive for up-and-coming filmmakers. Now, especially at the level of student/independent filmmaking, huge opportunities have emerged for making movies with relatively high-end production values for very little money.

numerous steps and/or the aid of other specialists. Editors using systems like Adobe Final Cut Pro can now do titles, color correction and a whole range of optical effects (e.g., wipes and dissolves) that formerly could not be done without the assistance of a special lab. Says Vincent LoBrutto, SVA film and video instructor, "If you have a video camera and an editing system, you have a movie studio."

#### DIGITAL'S DOWNSIDE

Nearly every apparent advantage of technology can also be perceived as a disadvantage, and the seeming limitlessness of the computer can be a severe limitation. For example, convenient access to many creative options may actually breed laziness and discourage attention to craft. Sal Petrosino, for one, is wary of what he calls "the seductive dazzle of technology."

"With digital editing," Petrosino says, "you can make 100 edits in the time it takes to make five on film. But



why even look at that many options? Students should really be working toward understanding the motivations behind the cuts and how they fit into the story they're trying to tell. Also, the convenience and immediacy of digital video fosters a faith in the machine's ability to get it right, rather than your own ability to light a scene correctly or make the right edits."

"You have to question the whole notion of whether a new technology is progress," says Manny Kirchheimer, another SVA film and video instructor.

When it comes to creating a pleasing image, no amount of technical training can take the place of a "good eye."

"The advantages of access provided by digital video don't necessarily make for better films. With documentaries, for example, a lot of the recent work is hurried and the filmmakers are obviously not as well versed in lighting as those in previous generations, who shot only on film."

Another drawback — cloaked in what would seem to be a benefit — is the computer's tendency to "democratize" certain fields, notably graphic design. Today, anyone who knows a few basic programs can try his or her hand at designing logos, newsletters and much more. But just because it can be done doesn't mean that it will be done well. When it comes to creating a pleasing image, no amount of technical training can take the place of a "good eye" — a command of color, balance, composition, spatial relationships — all of which must be learned and practiced again and again.

The neophyte "designer" may have no sensitivity whatsoever to crucial elements like visual literacy and conceptual strategy — programs of course have no way of correcting for that. So, what may have been undertaken as a cost-saving measure ("We don't have to hire a professional, the secretary can design our newsletter") may result in an unprofessional if not downright ugly final product. This can be especially dangerous if important matters like branding and corporate identity are involved.

Similarly, the wizardry of the computer can seduce employers to have well-qualified designers and other visual artists do jobs that are outside their area of expertise. Designers and illustrators thus are made to take on the roles of typesetter, photo retoucher and other specialized roles for which they have no training.

Another development brought about by technological change is that the computer's efficiency — its ability to produce much more work and in far less time than before — has led not to shorter hours and less work-related stress, but has in fact increased both time and pressure. Adam Wahler, an instructor in the Advertising and Graphic Design Department and the owner of a production company, describes a frenetic design world ratcheted up to a permanent state of maximum output. "The amount of work that gets produced in a short amount of time is unbelievable," says Wahler. "People want work done immediately. No one wants to hear that it can't be done; they can get someone else, they say. The work is done at such a fast pace, there's often no time for concept; creativity can be a luxury. In this atmosphere, computer skills, above all, are key."

#### ART EDUCATION IN A DIGITAL WORLD

Students come to SVA to learn how to be skilled visual communicators, which will certainly entail incorporating the computer into their methodologies. While computer technology in art is here to stay, no one can predict what the future will bring in terms of capabilities and developments.

One thing is certain: to produce quality work, students need to master the fundamental elements of their chosen field; time-honored principles within all the disciplines still hold true. "It's all about what you bring to the computer," says Wilde, "not what the computer brings to you." □