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## The House of Dust Symposium at the University of Davis

The University of California, Davis has a new Program in Technocultural Studies, headed by Douglas Kahn, and one of the first projects they programmed was a one-day symposium on "A House of Dust—a Symposium on the Origins of Digital Arts", celebrating Alison Knowles' 70<sup>th</sup> birthday and the celebration of the first digital poem. This took place 2 May on campus. To many at Davis, it was the first time to see Alison Knowles and James Tenney speak about the 1960s and the process of combining art and technology in the early 1960s. In so doing, Hannah Higgins who had just published a book about her parents, Dick Higgins and Alison (University of California Press) would also join the group to speak about the history of E.A.T. experiences, the history of technology to be expanded, as Douglas Kahn has expounded, to other fields as well. "In the history of computers and art, a lot of the initial developments are of historical significance only—not of great intrinsic interest—whereas the work of Knowles and Tenney was captivating in and of itself."

Tenney spoke about his assignment to the Bell Laboratories to experience with noise which lead to acoustics, Varèse, and the urban environment. The joining of artists of New York with the engineers of Bell created a new position of composer in residence for Tenney at the Laboratories. Tenney explained that this was the most productive period of his life, where he met Stan Brakhage and Carolee Schneemann, besides the engineers. It was the combination of music, mathematics and computers. Tenney continued to prove to the engineers at Bell that all sounds were possible with all its variables on the computer.

Tenney had been a disciple of John Cage and adapted himself to attentive listening, but with randomness and shaping to synthesized sound, he created new work. He found himself in two rooms with vacuum tubes and airconditioning. He sat at a desk programming with paper, where one card was used per line, creating a deck of cards at the end of each day. That led to a stack of digital tapes. He was developing programs for computer sound-generation and composition.

Tenney decided to teach his artist friends in New York Fortran programming, because he thought his artist friends should know about it, giving them a new tool to work with and he didn't want to keep it to himself, being of a generous

spirit. *The House of Dust* with Alison Knowles in 1968 was the product, the first computer-generated poem. The poem's format consisted of a rigid structure but its content was based on randomized variables chosen by the computer.

After each four-line stanza, known as a quatrain, the structure would repeat itself but with different words, creating in effect a never-ending poem, a true synthesis of art and technology. Alison Knowles felt it was a "poem in progress." The four lines went like this: "A house of (one out of 10 randomly selected materials), (in a randomly selected location), (with three possible light sources), inhabited by (randomly selected list of inhabitants)."

As a result, when this structure combined with digital randomization, some famous quatrains are: "A house of dust, on open ground, lighted by natural light, inhabited by friends and enemies," as well as "A house of paper, on an island, using electricity, inhabited by people who enjoy eating together."

The collaboration was that Knowles created the structure of the poem and the list of phrases from which the computer would select, while Tenney drafted the computer operations in the now-obsolete Fortran programming code. In this way, Knowles feels that "technology is no threat. I see it as the muse of our time."

As Tenney concluded, he does not feel that the divisions between art and science are as different as most people believe. In fact, much as McLuhan said, Tenney believes that artists are among the first people to use new technology in creative ways. "It's just in the nature of the artist sensibility. You see a new gadget and you think, "What can that do? What is this going to sound like?" Ever since, he has created the most beautiful music, using technology or not.

### FLUXUS EVENTS

**Fluxus Festival in Nice** 12 - 15 September 2003 organized by Ben.

**Oct.23-26 Dutch Fluxfest**, Netherlands, Utrecht. Video, film and Performance. Curator: Willem de Ridder

**Betwixt and Between: The Life and Fluxus Works of Dick Higgins** at Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota Duluth, from 2 September - 19 October 2003. Included will be *The Secret World of Fluxus: An Exhibition of Event Scores*.

**Yoko Ono performs Cut Piece** on 15 September in Paris resurrecting a piece she did in Japan nearly 40 years ago, a project for piece.