

AUDIOVISUAL ENVIRONMENT SUITE

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Audiovisual Environment Suite is a collection of five interactive artworks which allow people to create and perform dynamic animation and sound in ways which are direct, engaging, gestural and communicative. The works represented in the accompanying video tape are my exploratory hypotheses about what might be the analogy of musical instruments in the visual domain. While the computer is an excellent starting point for abstract visual experimentation, sound is often overlooked as an expressive element beyond music and literally recorded sounds. In this work I have attempted to bond visual and aural abstractions that exhibit a unique property of unification in expressive voice. This work is important as it represents a vision for creative activity on the computer, in which uniquely ephemeral dynamic media blossom from the expressive "voice" of a human user.

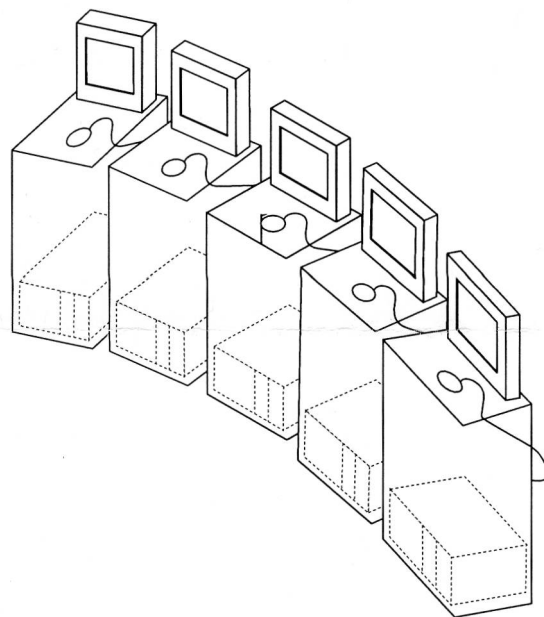
As artworks, the pieces of the Audiovisual Environment Suite extend an established Twentieth Century tradition, originated by such pioneers as Marcel Duchamp, Sol LeWitt, and Myron Krueger, in which artworks are themselves generative systems for other media; in Marshall McLuhan's terms, such systems are characterized by an "outer medium" (in this case, gestural performance and interaction) whose forms make possible the articulation of yet other expressions in an "inner medium" (for this work, synthetic sound and image). Distinguishing such meta-artworks from the kinds of artifacts we conventionally call "tools" or "instruments" is largely a question of semantics and context; my intent in creating the software systems in the Audiovisual Environment Suite was as a set of vehicles through which I could explore and present a strictly personal audiovisual vocabulary, and suggest provocative new possibilities for human-machine interaction.

Two goals have motivated my design choices in these interactive artworks. The first is that the interfaces of such systems be instantly knowable, but also infinitely expressible. Rarely are software systems both easy to learn, and extremely powerful, for to be so demands that their rules of operation be simple, yet afford a boundless space of possible outcomes. This is difficult, and nearly contradictory. Nevertheless, there exist real-world exemplars of such systems, such as the piano and the pencil: although any four-year-old can discover their basic principles of operation, an adult can just as well spend fifty years practicing at them, and still feel like there remains more that can be expressed through them, and more mastery that can be achieved in performing with them. Such systems, moreover, have the extraordinary property that an individual may eventually, through their use, discover or reveal a unique and personal voice in that medium. We each have our own spatio-temporal signatures, our own unique ways of moving through space; successful instruments bring the character of these traces into relief and reflect them back to us. An essential goal of this work has been the design of interactive artworks that possess these qualities, of simplicity, possibility, and transparency.

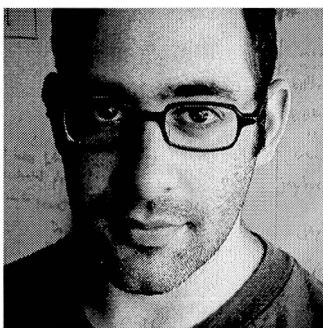
A second goal driving the design of these systems has been the exploration of new metaphors relating sound and image, that can permit a visual performance system to be coincident with an equally expressive, infinitely variable sound performance system, and not merely a playback machine for canned samples and graphics. The infinite plasticity of a synthetic canvas demands that any sonic counterpart to it be equally malleable and infinite in its possibilities; the Audiovisual Environment Suite represents my answer to this challenge.

A simple installation of the Audiovisual Environment Suite takes the form of a row or circle of five standard Pentium computers, each on its own podium and equipped with a pair of speakers and a mouse (or, preferably, a Wacom pen tablet). Completion of the works' sonification is expected by the end of May 2000; for the time being, what all of the environments share is that they make possible the real-time performance and creation of animated form and color, and point towards a new type of creative authoring experience.

A simple installation of the
Audiovisual Environment Suite.



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ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Golan Levin is a researcher in the Aesthetics and Computation Group at the MIT Media Laboratory. He is interested in creating artifacts and environments which explore new modes of audiovisual expression. Golan received a Bachelor of Science degree in Art and Design from MIT in 1994, and worked as a research scientist and interaction designer at Interval Research Corporation, Palo Alto, for four years. Golan has exhibited interactive artworks at several venues, including the SIGGRAPH 1996 Art Show, ISEA '97, the San Jose Tech Museum of Innovation, and the American Museum of the Moving Image. At Ars Electronica '97, Golan and collaborator Paul Debevec exhibited the interactive exhibit "Rouen Revisited."