

The Digital Workshop as Exhibition Space

By Duncan Speakman

Throughout Formality we have presented the residencies as gallery spaces, where audiences can watch the work being created.

As the trend towards 'software development' continues the visibility of the production becomes less and less. Can the workspace of the 'digital artist' present something valuable to people with no knowledge of the medium?

The romantic vision of an artist's studio is one scattered with tools, half empty paint pots and formative sketches. Even with no artistic training it is possible to understand what is going on. Recognising the similarity between the shapes in the sketches and the paintings on the wall involves only pattern recognition, a basic prerequisite of intelligence (and something computers are only just beginning to learn). As the painter applies paint to a canvas, or the sculptor chips away we can see the work forming before our very eyes. We can see the physical skill and attention to detail combined with emotional expression.

This leaves the person hunched over a computer screen in a poor position. The connection between lines and lines of incomprehensible words and numbers and an animation is a conceptual jump that is hard to make (even for many animators!). The 'artist' will smile with glee as a different number is displayed, but for anyone watching to the sense of gradual progression is missing.

When finally a single key is pressed and sounds or images magically appear, the casual viewer may easily assume that it is entirely the computers doing. In the same way any of us might type an address into our web browser and see this kind of art.

For many people, computer programming is associated with banking, IT, science and many other skills removed from the traditional notion of art, but as practitioners of digitally based creativity tunnel deeper into their tools we are as likely to see technical manuals as art theory texts under their arms.

So is it possible to excite people about the work before it is finished? Potentially yes, but it requires more than just opening a door.