

Form and Mutability: Algorithmic Worlds and Organic Television

An interview with William Latham

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Generative art, the forerunner of generative music (and host to others, generative wallpaper, generative silk loons) is the brainchild of William Latham. Rooted in the reunion of Science and Art, by way of Biology, Sculpture and the digital domain, Latham dialogues his comp. art here across a broad canvas of questions.

The computer artist William Latham's digitally generated forms have been flitting into my sensory realm for several years. As that awareness of Latham's work grew so has that of the whole computer-art field correspondingly broadened.

A few years ago, whilst accompanying a small cousin to commune with the dinosaurs at the Natural History Museum, I chanced upon Latham's work along the corridor. Much to my cousin's annoyance I insisted on wandering around this odd selection of computer-generated loops which were busy budding and mutating eerie, fantastical forms in front of our eyes. The conditions were good, a darkened room, and the dulled ambient ceiling light reinforcing the glow of the exhibits set around the room. Strangely perhaps, the memory remains of the technology and the creativity being welcoming, unthreatening, in its element, not out of place. Latham's forms, if you haven't come across them, are indeed deeply fantastical and sci-fi, using an occasional amalgam of garish colours, and forever fruiting themselves before you, growing their odd octopoid shapes, mutating into new forms. They move like slow-flowing sea creatures you might find on the floor of Neptune's oceans, or rolling along the dystopian otherness of the set of Alien cubed. Yet the origin of these forms derives from the Humanist Renaissance tradition, and its rebreathing of life into the three dimensional worlds of geometry. Latham when he was

first becoming absorbed by the world of form would take himself off from his graduate course at the Royal College of Art to the Natural History Museum to study form in the natural world. At the same time he had come across the biologist D'Arcy Thompson's book, *The Growth of Form* which discusses in detail the organismic ordering of form in nature. A landmark in the organismic tradition of biology where the discipline is viewed as one of qualities, rather than that of quantities associated with molecular biology, the tradition the book reinvigorated still rests at the edge of mainstream biology. Latham, although acknowledging the immersion and influence of D'Arcy Thompson when asked, clearly identifies himself with the genocentric approach of molecular biology. His art is actually called Genetic or Algorithmic Art.

Since that day, Latham's work has appeared on my horizon a variety of times. Via Television, exhibitions, and his book with his erstwhile colleague, mathematician Stephen Todd, *Evolutionary Art and Computers*, on the development and use of their 'Mutator' software programme, various questions began about Latham's particular branch in the tree of art known as Evolutionary, Genetic or Algorithmic Art. His interviews also looked potentially interesting. He had developed a good line in topical metaphors to describe his work; the artist as Gardener, selecting and breeding his fruiting forms, for instance, and his belief that his straddling of the Artist-Scientist divide was equivalent to Renaissance Man writ contemporary in a computer graphics context. When I had been in touch with him about the interview I noted a series of questions which I thought would develop an interesting if not computer-dogmatist path to work from. I was particularly 'animated', for want of a phrase, by his Renaissance Man comparison. It's a well-used notion that there are Renaissance Men working away in the forefront of technological developments at present, yet also situated

