Otto Laske, "In the Digital Vein"
An interview with Martin Ray

Less than a decade ago, discovering digital animations suddenly opened a world for integrating my music and poetry with image sequences. I start with a single animation frame as an origin point for the work. The computer becomes my alter ego, my 'Other.' The program I use responds to what I do with what it gives me, leading to an immense feedback loop. This mental process is something I had practiced for some time in composing electronic music.

The digital process in the visual arts differs from painting or drawing by hand because of the myriad options that come into play. Software can store action plans that derive from an analysis of what is presently on the screen. In this sense, the software "knows" something about its user, although in an elementary way. The software's algorithms become part of the artist's creative intuition.

Limits of Stability

By 'alter ego' I mean that, stored in software, there is something like a knowledge base that I'm confronted with that makes suggestions as to what could be happening next. My goal is to accept the input of the alter ego and work with what it presents to me. I welcome the unforeseen. In a way the virtual alter ego is a mentor, somebody who suggests alternatives. You couldn't possibly devise all these variants it can create by yourself, and your memory couldn't hold them all. So it's an incredible world out there, aesthetically.

I may go from drawing to painting while I work, and back to drawing. I may also decide to cover photographic effects by painting over them, or try to strengthen them by using my brush to create them in the first place. In terms of the mental process involved, distinctions between painting, drawing, and photography are highly relative in the digital domain. It's a fluid universe.
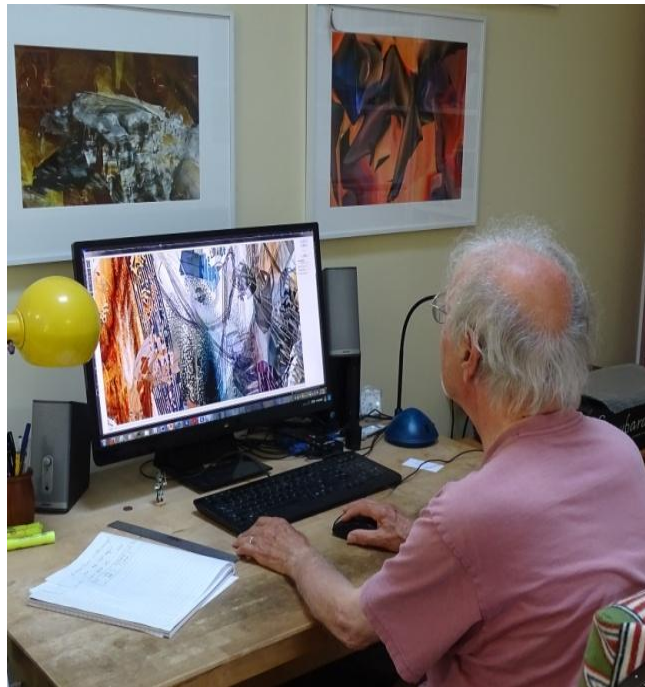
Otto Laske composing an image

There is always a feedback loop between what the computer presents to you and what you think you want. Based on this feedback, the artist builds his own set of tools, the "presets" for colors, brush, texture, and image manipulation s(he) can create and store for later use. I call it the task environment. Your studio, a virtual studio, amounts to an internal work place.

With electronic music composition I was aided by a score generator. In the visual arts, I use a Graphics Synthesizer which lets me draw, paint, and manipulate images. For this reason, I think of my visual work as frozen music. What matters to me in drawing and painting is the movement, the energy moving through the image as it comes into being, the modulation of colors and the resolution of conflicts between shapes, lines, colors, and textures. That all comes from music for me.

Flying Machine

What is true for painting also holds for drawing, as in the image above, and equally for abstract photography, as in the image below.

Light Sculpture

Who cares to categorize these images? For me, both capture movement, line and light. An image in this sense is frozen music. It's not pinned to a particular time point, unlike music itself which plays out *over* time.

I was initially drawn to visualization while listening to music with eyes closed. Images emerged in my mind. I began to look for technical means to capture them. I found a way to go beyond sound-to-image translators by using software for making images myself. It was a matter of creating images truly germane to my music. Out of this my visual aesthetics arose.

Although the contemporary art world has not accepted it, the boundaries between the arts are permeable, not-sacrosanct. Tying together different domains and skill sets uses the holistic mind, in both the sciences and the arts.

The Creation

I sense much more to mind than logical thinking allows you to follow. The world is so complex that to stop short at thinking logically is a crime, or at least a failure in self-development. Because you know, the world is really inscrutable. It is so rich, so inexhaustible that you shouldn't be limited by your logical mind and conventional artistic boundaries. Aesthetics is part of morality for me.

I have always experimented with poetry, especially when writing prose poems. Charles Olson, whose work I encountered in 1989 or so, spoke of the typewriter as a medium that enabled him to conceive of poetry differently, to distribute it over the page. I thought, well, we can do better than even the typewriter. Why not use a computer? A word processor? I began writing *prose poems* using a sentence generator. It too is an alter ego. You define the set of words that you want to be privileged in the poem you want to write. You determine how long the sentences and lines are to be, the vocabulary, the length of the poem.

CONVULSIONS

Where clay meets the sound of iron,
you park harm over the death
of oak and drop all music.

The sun presses the afternoon further.
You are gasping, looking for escape;
you can't believe in anyone's

noisy heart bearing uncaring truth.

The hope of language is waiting
in a wood behind your tongue.
You close the path of sound, computing
its strength. Are you fighting gestures?
…

(1990)

Why do we make art? What in the world makes it possible, necessary to make art? It's about our relationship to the world we are seeing. And this world changes over everybody's lifetime. That's part of the human condition.

I think the artist must develop a sense of his own times and use the most advanced means available to capture it. I'm aware of a tremendous harmony of minds who have tried to do so through the ages, a music of the spheres, so to speak. That's what I listen for.