ben f. laposky
the 1953 electronic abstractions exhibition: restaged and remixed

Kemper Room Art Gallery
Paul V. Galvin Library
April 13 - September 16, 2006
opening reception:
Thursday, April 13, 4:30 - 7:30 pm
exhibition hours:
Monday - Thursday: 12 noon - 6 pm
Friday: 12 noon - 8 pm
Saturday: 8:30 am - 5 pm
Sunday: 2 - 6 pm
art.iit.edu

The late Ben Laposky is among the pioneers in electronic art, which preceded the development of computer graphics. This exhibit recreates his first exhibition held in 1953. It includes over 100 black & white and color images, and is the first showing of his collected works and historical images from his archives in over 35 years.

curator:
Robert J. Krawczyk, Assistant Professor,
College of Architecture

executor:
Mindy Ann Sherman, College of Science and Letters

assistant:
Joseph Huang, College of Architecture

sponsored by:
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Illinois Institute of Technology
3621 South State Street, Chicago, IL 60616

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Exhibition Coordinator
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Kemper Room Art Gallery, Paul V. Galvin Library, 35 West 33rd Street, Chicago, IL 60616 312-567-5293, art@iit.edu
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art @ IIT
ILLINOIS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
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When this exhibit was first produced in 1953, it was described as being comprised of large photographs of beautiful design compositions created by electrical wave forms produced on a cathode-ray oscilloscope. The oscilloscope, similar to a TV receiver in appearance, has varied uses in the field of electronics. At a time when there is so much use of electronics in industry and science, it is of special interest to find this application in the field of art.

Laposky's development of this electronic technique is the most advanced yet shown, at that time, especially in the complexity, variety and abstract art values of the designs which he also calls "Oscillons." For a period covering more than 16 years, starting in the early 1950's, he has made a study of design related to mathematical forms and related natural forms, including pendulum patterns. As the oscilloscope will display many similar types, Laposky was led to consider its use in combing them or shaping them so as to create new abstract forms of art. The result of his work is a fascinating series of abstract designs, many of which give the impression of being suspended in space. The unusual effects obtained are especially appropriate and in line with the trend toward the abstract in much of contemporary art in other media.

In Laposky's own writings, he describes in great detail the technical aspects of his work and much of the work of others preceding him and of the period, but very little about the actual artistic meanings of his own work, here is one small example where he begins to consider that. This is from Electronic Abstracts - Art for the Space Age, from the Proceedings of The Iowa Academy of Science, 1958: "New forms and techniques of art for the space age may involve physical forces and ideas, as well as materials and procedures from technology. Such a new approach to abstract design is that shown here in the electronic abstractions or oscillons. Moholy-Nagy, one of the leaders of the Bauhaus movement in Germany, has stated in Vision in Motion that "most of the visual work in the future lies with the 'light-painter.'" Moholy-Nagy continues: "He will have the scientific knowledge of the physicist and the technological skill of the engineer, coupled with his own imagination, creative intuition and emotional intensity." Electronic abstractions are a form of painting in light, traced on the fluorescent face of the cathode-ray tube of an oscilloscope by the moving electron beam."

Further in the same paper, he writes: "As art forms, the designs are called abstractions as they do not, of course, illustrate any real objects in nature. They are more nonobjective, actually, as they are not abstracted from anything, either. The viewer of the designs may use his own imagination to see natural forms or objects in them, which may account for part of their appeal. But, part of it is also due to the rhythmic nature of the patterns and their mathematical precision. It is in this symmetry, balance and rhythmic sequence that art and science meet on a common ground. There is also an interesting parallel between these designs and music, as can be shown in several ways. The abstractions, as has been demonstrated, are created by electrical waveforms, as music is made up of sound waveforms. The designs are abstract and mathematical, just as music, for the most part, abstract and mathematical. Then there is another association through electronics that music may be played on electrical organs or the theremin, and may even be synthesized by electronic computers."

Laposky (1914-2000) is a native of Cherokee, Iowa, but lived in Colorado Springs for a number of years, graduating from high school there and returning to Iowa in 1932. In World War II, he was a combat map draftsman in the Army stationed in the South Pacific, and was wounded during a Japanese bombing raid in the Solomons. While by occupation he was a lettering artist and draftsman in a sign business in Cherokee, he had always been interested in art and science. He has contributed articles to journals on mathematics and design and was a member of the Mathematics Association of America.

In 1967, Laposky reports that the Electronic Abstractions exhibit organized by the Sanford Museum had been shown 119 times in the United States, in 103 cities, in 34 states since 1953. Smaller groups of work had been shown another 45 times. Internationally the work was shown in Canada, England, Scotland, France, and Israel. Individual images appeared in over 100 publications, including ten books. Scholarly papers included the Proceedings of Iowa Academy of Science of 1958 and Leonardo in 1969. A complete set of his work was exhibited here at IIT, at the Institute of Design, between the years 1958 and 1961.

The exhibit also displays reproductions of photographs of Laposky, his equipment, and documents found in his archives. The archives also include over 150 photographs that were never mounted or displayed; these are also be on view.

Special thanks to the Sanford Museum, Cherokee, Iowa, Linda Burkhart, Director, for allowing access to and display of the Laposky Archives and cosponsoring this exhibition.

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