

DAVID STOUT: 100 MONKEY GARDEN: ARTIFICIAL LIFE INSTALLATION

MOV-IN GALLERY, COLLEGE OF SANTA FE
1600 ST. MICHAEL'S DRIVE, SANTA FE

Artificial life, or a-life, is a young, interdisciplinary scientific field concerned with the creation and study of artificial systems that mimic or manifest the properties of living systems.... While [these systems] apply the techniques and ideas of artificial life in a variety of ways, they present themselves as art objects rather than as scientific artifacts.

—Mitchell Whitelaw, *Metacreation: Art and Artificial Life*

There are many levels of meaning situated within David Stout's new installation, *100 Monkey Garden*. In attempting to write about some of those levels, one can get lost in a labyrinth of references: to differential equations and computer code; to time, motion, color, pattern, and the forces of attraction and repulsion. There is also Stout's own mythical concept of genesis responsible for the rich counterpoint of seemingly unending morphology, a continuous metamorphosis of simulated artificial life forms, beautiful and bewitching to behold. *100 Monkey Garden* is a manifestation of digital dialectics to an extraordinary degree, and there it conceptually sits, at the intersection of art, science, and technology—shimmering with breathtaking sequences aligned with their rigorous underpinnings.



David Stout, *100 Monkey Garden*, new media video project (detail), 2006

Stout, however, does not work alone—he collaborates with two extraordinary programmers. Cory Metcalf is one, and he is a Digital Systems Manager at the College of Santa Fe where Stout is a professor in the Moving Image Arts Department. The second collaborator is New York-based Luke DuBois, the creator of the program Jitter that allows for visual modeling from sound data. Jitter plays an important role in Stout's work; the morphological transformations in his garden are determined by low frequency oscillations—small increments of audio changes cause the visual forms to unfold in a constant process of audio to video feedback looping.

100 Monkey Garden, comprising a double-screen projection, has an archetypal quartet of a-life protagonists inhabiting Stout's space of investigation. On one screen there are two wire-frame "parents" who careen through a fictive black space and couple in computer-generated fashion, producing a gamut of progeny that assumes various abstract floating shapes. In any given sequence, their color and pattern are determined by information programmed into the system and taken from various video sources. The "predator" is a form that groups and regroups on its own screen until it reaches a critical mass of implosive destructive tendencies and then lunges into the home space of the parents with their alluring and vulnerable offspring. The predator searches, strikes, and devours whole clusters of progeny while the wire-frame parents continue their frantic efforts at digital breeding. Any similarities, though, between primate genesis and Stout's imaginative metacreative process are purely coincidental.

Indeed, a narrative can be spun around this installation, and the viewer can get hooked by the narrative and let it suffice for one rationale for this piece, but that would be missing all the real fun which lies at the heart of the interface. Whitelaw writes in *Metacreation: Art and Artificial Life*, "Most immediately, the artwork itself is striking. It evolves, responds, mutates, and forms complex, supple systems and cryptic alien artifacts.... At the same time, conventions of creative agency are stretched to breaking point: much of the work is made in such a way that it makes itself—it is somehow autonomous. Is this an abdication of creative will or its ultimate fulfillment?"

Stout's latest work is a result of his interest in metacreation—art at right angles to the pursuit of artificial life with its simulated processes of mutation, evolution, and possibly, emergent behavior. This pursuit—for Stout and others like him—takes on a dimension of its own, however, beyond the control of direct programming. Who can say that emergent, self-organizing behavior isn't possible within the confines of metacreation? Who can say that the spontaneous emergence of certain behaviors engendered in micro-electronic systems could never escape the constraints put upon them by the tweaking of all those zeroes and ones?

Stout's a-life garden is based on, he says, "a number of simple relationships that when tied together produce a rich complexity." Using four out of a possible fifty-four equations at any given time, the inherently mathematical space of *100 Monkey Garden* is in a continual state of visual and aural flux simulating the lives of parents, predator, and prey along with an even deeper theme: How to visualize the artistic process itself? Although the programming for the garden is predictable to a certain degree, Stout and Metcalf can never fully control the visual output that manifests on the screens. Surprises happen. Spontaneous behaviors occur. Or seem to. And scientists and artists alike can't rule out the possibility that the interface of art, science, and technology could be the breeding ground for "... an abstract distillation of aliveness, life itself, reembodyed in voltage and silicon." One interpretation of the processes unfolding in the projections is that they represent the artist himself always in a state of being-to-becoming—always engendering, devouring, killing everything that came before, and giving birth to culture all over again with every new work. Stout's futuristic garden space is guaranteed to entrance and provoke the viewer through its considerable aesthetic allure and the ingenuity of the gardener's vision. One more thing: Beauty is its own reward and there is plenty of it here to go around, emanating ceaselessly from this brilliant and seductive work.

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