

Harold Cohen Obituary by Paul Cohen

Harold Cohen, artist and pioneer in the field of computer-generated art, died on April 27, 2016 at the age of 87. Cohen is the author of AARON, perhaps the longest-lived and certainly the most creative artificial intelligence program in daily use. Cohen viewed AARON as his collaborator. At times during their decades-long relationship AARON was quite autonomous, responsible for the composition, coloring and other aspects of a work; more recently, AARON served Cohen by making drawings that Cohen would develop into paintings. Cohen's death is the end of a lengthy partnership between an artist and an artificial intelligence.

Cohen grew up in England. He studied painting at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London, and later taught at the Slade as well as Camberwell, Nottingham and other arts schools. He represented Great Britain at major international festivals during the 60's, including the Venice Biennale, Documenta 3, and the Paris Biennale. He showed widely and successfully at the Robert Fraser Gallery, the Alan Stone Gallery, the Whitechapel Gallery, the Arnolfini Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and many other notable venues in England and Europe. Then, in 1968, he left London for a one-year visiting faculty appointment in the Art Department at the University of California, San Diego. One year became many, Cohen became Department Chair, then Director of the Center for Research in Computing and the Arts at UCSD, and eventually retired emeritus in 1994.

Leaving the familiar, rewarding London scene presaged a career of restless invention. By 1971, Cohen had taught himself to program a computer and exhibited computer-generated art at the Fall Joint Computer Conference. The following year, he exhibited not only a program but also a drawing machine at the Los Angeles County Museum. A skilled engineer, Cohen built many display devices: flatbed plotters, a robotic "turtle" that roamed and drew on huge sheets of paper, even a painting robot that mixed its own colors. These machines and the museum-goers' experiences were always important to Cohen, whose fundamental question was, "What makes images evocative?" The distinguished computer scientist and engineer Gordon Bell notes that "Harold was really a scientist and engineer of art." Indeed, AARON was a thoroughly empirical project: Cohen studied how children draw, he tracked down the petroglyphs of California's Native Americans, he interviewed viewers and he experimented with algorithms to discover the characteristics of images that make them seem to stand for something. Although AARON went through an overtly representational phase, in which images were recognizably of people or potted plants, Cohen and AARON returned to abstraction and evocation and methods for making images that produce cascades of almost-recognition and associations in the minds of viewers.

“Harold Cohen is one of those rare individuals in the Arts who performs at the highest levels both in the art world and the scientific world,” said Professor Edward Feigenbaum of Stanford University’s Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, where Cohen was exposed to the ideas and techniques of Artificial Intelligence. “All discussions of creativity by computer invariably cite Cohen’s work,” said Feigenbaum.

Cohen had no patience for the "is it art?" question. He showed AARON's work in the world's galleries, museums and science centers -- the Tate, the Stedelijk, the San Francisco Museum of Art, Documenta, the Boston Computer Museum, the Ontario Science Center, and many others. His audiences might have been drawn in by curiosity and the novelty of computer-generated art, but they would soon ask, how can a machine make such marvelous pictures? How does it work? The very questions that Cohen asked himself throughout his career.

AARON's images and Cohen's essays and videos can be viewed at www.aaronshome.com.

Cohen is survived by his partner Hiromi Ito; by his brother Bernard Cohen; by Paul Cohen, Jenny Foord and Zana Itoh Cohen; by Sara Nishi, Kanoko Nishi-Smith, and Uta and Oscar Nishi-Smith; by Becky Cohen; and by Allegra Cohen, Jacob and Abigail Foord, and Harley and Naomi Kuych-Cohen.