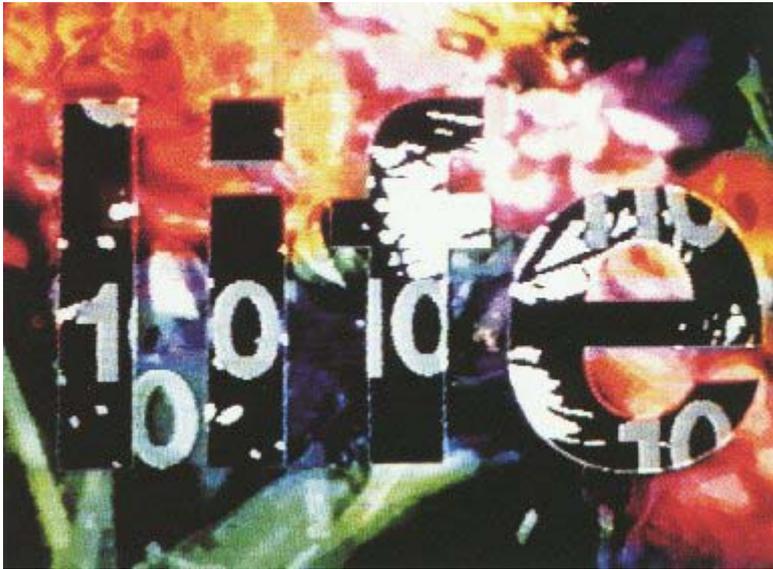
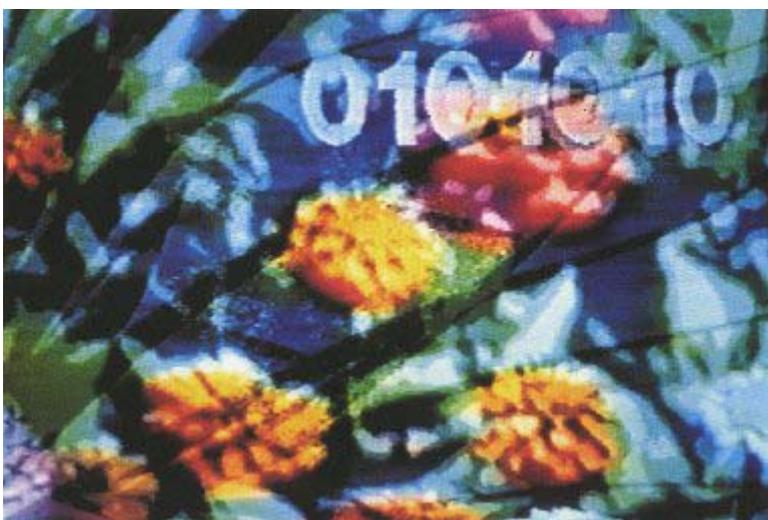


**THE DIGITAL GARDEN VERSION III  
ROSS HARLEY**



Ross Harley, Immortelle 1992



The Digital Garden is an ongoing video computer-graphic project that focuses on the changing relations between natural and artificial environments.

Despite its mythic paradisiacal associations, the garden is no stranger to the world of artifice, machinery or technology. In essence the garden — from its Persian, Egyptian, Chinese and European origins — is an arrangement of natural elements, reproducing a "living picture" that might arouse the same feelings that one might experience far from the reaches of human invention. But invention these living architectural places most certainly remain.

Another connection — between horticulture and technoculture — could perhaps be found in the parallel technological transition from the mechanical automata of Greco-Roman times to the cellular automata and A-Life of our own. On the surface at least, both attempt to somehow synthesize the machinery of the universe, imitating the processes of life via technological means. In this Aristotelian fashion, art (techne) completes what nature is unable to finish, by imitative means.

The Digital Garden accommodates the electronic life-forms that are appropriate to the mechanical, electronic and digital conditions of the present, incorporating this new nature into the culture of living things. Taking the work of Aristid Lindenmayer as inspiration — whose "L-systems" have been crucial to the development of computer graphics that accurately "imitate" (or model) plant growth — this project plays upon our desire to artificially create and manipulate nature through our own complex systems.

That this happens in a "garden" should not surprise us. A selective mirror, as large as life and twice as natural, the garden provides a model of what we think the world is like. The dreams of Pythagoras, Euclid and von Neuman reflect and distort new insights into nature. From its Edenic origins through its geometric rigidity (in Europe and the East), and its formal disintegration in the late seventeenth century, these organic/architectural spaces unite inside and outside (house/garden, nature/technics, transmission/reception, etc.) as place, action and idea. To this day the making of artificial nature is achieved not so much through material intervention, as by the power of spatial, sensual and visual manipulation of our corporeal experience.

This third version of the garden evolves out of three recent works — Version I (produced in collaboration with Ken Maher), The Digital Garden Version II and Immortelle — exhibited as installations and as single-channel video works during 1992 and 1993.

Immortelle is a science fiction style video installation that presents the programs of an imaginary computer capable of emulating the forms of organic life. Based on the writings and ideas of biologists such as D'Arcy Thompson and Aristid Lindenmayer, SF writers like Clifford D. Simak, the historian of life-sciences Francois Jacob, and the filmmaking of Jean Luc Godard, Immortelle conjurs a universe where mathematical calculation creates "mutant" variations of basic algorithms of life. In the terms of Artificial Life, Immortelle conjures a recursive program that invents visualizations; not of life-as-we-know-it, but of life-as-it-could-be.

The Digital Garden continued to explore these ideas of (digital) growth, architectural space, and our historically changing view of natural and artificial environments. Responding to the question of the relation between the built environment and the immaterial information landscape, this third version of the garden juxtaposes and unites electronic data in an architectural/ecological space. As "viewers" enter the garden, they encounter a variety of

electronic life-forms that present themselves on a largescreen projection and on a series of video monitors. The electronic forms flow across the large video backgrounds of archetypal garden scenes — the formal axial perspectives of Versailles, the Taj Mahal, Hyde Park, and an imaginary video-composite space — which invite the viewer to wander through the artificial garden.

Most of these graphics are played from four videotape sources. There is limited provision for computer graphics to be activated by the participant in real-time. Each visit to the garden reveals a new set of artificial life-forms. The next version of the garden will allow for more extensive real-time interaction in the artificial graphic world. This version is currently being developed with Jon McCormack whose L-system software (which he has developed for use on Silicon Graphics workstations) utilizes recent achievements in the area of interactive evolution (based on CA and L-systems for computer graphics modelling). Hence the next iteration of The Digital Garden will imitate the patterns of biological and electronic growth in real-time, allowing the visitor to produce an ever-changing variety of life-forms in a garden that is at once familiar and bizarre.

The Digital Garden is an extension of many ideas concerning the inter-relation of electronic media, natural phenomena and the artificial environment. It develops many of these ideas, joining questions of design in the second machine age to the realm of the cybernetic revolution. If it is true to say that the Renaissance built with perspective and motion, the Victorians with order and stone, and the moderns with machines and concrete, how should we respond to the (natural) environment in the age of information, media and digital reproduction?

How can we recover the fractional dimension of nature, the artificiality of life, and the sciences of complex dynamical systems (at once organism and technology) that converge in our new machine-nature that is so radically changing our fundamental liminal state, the most basic condition of our synthetic and permeative existence?