PHOTO

New Spirit of Photography: Art and technology mesh in this fascinating show (organized by Patt Blue) of work employing computer, copier, teleprinter, radiograph, high voltage, Robot Slo-Scan, and Kirlian photography. The participants include Eric Staller, Mary Jo Toles, Walter Chappell, Ron MacNeil, Sheila Pinkel, Woody Vasulka, Sonia Sheridan, and Nancy Burson (who exhibits a computer assisted portrait of Etan Patz as he would look today).
Through May 4, Artisan Space at FIT, Building E, 227 West 27th Street, 760-7642. (McDarrah)
Once, photographs were the allies of truth. They seemed to show us reality itself, and science in a flawless mirror. When the poet and critic Charles Baudelaire called photography "art's most mortal enemy," in 1858, he was inveighing against the medium's very nature, its kinship with the world it depicted. "If it be allowed to encroach upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary... so much the worse for us!," he warned.

In the late 20th century we have finally learned to be aware of the hidden agenda of photographs. No longer do we see them as natural or even neutral depictions, but as images like any others, loaded with the implicit biases of their makers and of the culture from which they issued. Still, most of us continue to assume that images made with cameras automatically reflect a living, breathing world "out there," and not "the impalpable and the imaginary" realm valued by Baudelaire.

Now even that assumption has become outdated. With new, computer-based technology, it is possible to produce photographic images that bear absolutely no connection to any external reality. The impact of this radical development has yet to make itself fully felt in public consciousness, but already photographers and other artists are beginning to recognize its meaning and to explore its potentials. For evidence, we need only look to "The New Spirit of Photography," a group show of "artistic and conceptual photography" at the Artisanspace Gallery of the Fashion Institute of Technology, and "Simulacra: Forms without Substance," an exhibition of computer-generated portraits by Nancy Burson at the International Center of Photography.

What distinguishes most of the pictures in these shows is that they are formed by digital, on-off impulses rather than by the smooth and seamless tonalities of conventional photographic processes. As a consequence, on close inspection they often look fuzzy, broken up or incomplete. They bear the same relationship to traditional photography that dot-matrix computer printouts bear to traditional typewriter pages, and on seeing them for the first time we may want to join Baudelaire in his woes-laden lament.

But there also is quite a lot of esthetic head-scratching and artistic play at work on this technological frontier, which makes at least for a lively and invigorating atmosphere. At the Artisanspace show, not one of the 17 artists included duplicates the territory of any other. X-rays, teleprinters, high voltage discharges, Xerox machines and Fourth of July sparklers are among the means used to make these images. There's even a videotape, by Steina Vasulka, which documents the development of a home-grown computer device for manipulating still images on a video monitor.

Nevertheless, it has to be said that most of the so-called "advanced technology" art displayed to date is, for all its technical sophistication, rather elementary in impact. One sure sign that old aesthetic concepts hold sway in the field is the form of presentation: for many people working in computer graphics, the goal still seems to be to produce a picture that fits the accepted definition of what a picture should look like. The situation today is not unlike that of video art in the early 70's: the potential of the technology has been grasped, but its relationship to the traditional arts has not yet been settled in a satisfactory way.

Of the few artists who have managed to produce work that challenges the photography of the past, and that forces us to reconsider our notions of what images are and can be, perhaps the most provocative is Nancy Burson. Miss Burson's computer-generated "portraits," 18 of which are featured at ICP (there's one to be seen at Artisanspace as well), focus squarely on the issue of photographic truth. For, in fact, none of the people we see in these pictures is real. In collaboration with computer wizards Richard Carlimg and David Kramlich, the artist combines the faces of five movie stars into one "average" ideal face—or ten businessmen into one archetypal businessman, or a male and female torso into one "hermaphro- dite." The images are achieved by what's described as "a patented facial warping system," but whatever the complexities of technology involved, the results are more than a bit eerie.

In some instances, Miss Burson seems merely to be having fun, as when she combines the face of a woman with that of a cat, and at other times she seems intent on making a political point, as in a series of "Warheads" portraits that combine the visages of the leaders of countries possessing nuclear weapons, statistically weighted by the number on warheads at each leader's disposal. Nowhere is the unsettling potential of her technique more explicit than, ever, than in an image called "Etan Patz Update." Etan Patz is the child who disappeared six years ago in Soho while on his way to school and has never been seen since. Miss Burson's portrait purports to show what he would look like today, at age 12.

What we have here, in short, is a powerful new tool for creating lifelikeness of what doesn't exist, but only be imagined. Its social and political consequences, left largely unexamined in these images, are not difficult to imagine. Already it has attracted interest outside the art world; the "Etan Patz Update," we are told, was commissioned by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

However tentative and esthetically unsatisfying much of today's high-technology art may seem, then, there is no use denying that we stand on the edge of a brave new world of image making—a world in which photography's last lingering claim to a privileged purchase on reality is summarily negated. To today's admittedly much of today's high-technology art may seem, then, there is no use denying that we stand on the edge of a brave new world of image making—a world in which photography's last lingering claim to a privileged purchase on reality is summarily negated. To today's admittedly familiar, the digital image can be anything it wants to be. Images now can be produced with computers that once upon a time were small and slow, that could only be created with the most sophisticated equipment. Today, a world in which photography's last lingering claim to a privileged purchase on reality is summarily negated. To today's admittedly familiar, the digital image can be anything it wants to be. Images now can be produced with computers that once upon a time were small and slow, that could only be created with the most sophisticated equipment. Today, a world in which photography's last lingering claim to a privileged purchase on reality is summarily negated. To today's admittedly familiar, the digital image can be anything it wants to be. Images now can be produced with computers that once upon a time were small and slow, that could only be created with the most sophisticated equipment. Today, a world in which photography's last lingering claim to a privileged purchase on reality is summarily negated. To today's admittedly familiar, the digital image can be anything it wants to be. Images now can be produced with computers that once upon a time were small and slow, that could only be created with the most sophisticated equipment. Today, a world in which photography's last lingering claim to a privileged purchase on reality is summarily negated. To today's admittedly familiar, the digital image can be anything it wants to be. Images now can be produced with computers that once upon a time were small and slow, that could only be created with the most sophisticated equipment.