

VIRTUAL PHOTOGRAPHY PHSCOLOGRAMS

## \*arts & antiques



The virtual-reality caricature of "Franz K." is one of the PHSColograms created by Chris Landreth, Ellen Sandor, Stephan Meyers and Janine Fron.

### WEIRD SCIENCE

An exhibit of 3-D art puts a new spin on classic concepts, while providing a template for some major scientific breakthroughs. [By Abigail Foerstner](#)

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There's really only one place in town for a good conversation with Franz Kafka.

His single open eye follows your. His head bulges with curious protrusions. Skewers pierce their way from his mind of Kafkaesque nightmares, where an ordinary guy like hapless Gregor in *The Metamorphosis* awakens to find himself turned into a bug.

# (art)<sup>n</sup>

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Did your chronic insomnia, depression and anxiety contribute much to this classic, Franz?

The author, who died in 1924, doesn't answer. Truth be told, the conversation is a monologue with a virtual-reality Kafka, a caricature by Oscar-winning animated moviemaker Christopher Landreth that pairs cutting-edge VR with Landreth's searing "psychorealism." Franz hangs flat to the wall yet moves with your every step at the (art)<sup>n</sup> collective, a cyberspace outpost ticked near downtown Chicago. Here, 3D visualization of chaos math, lethal viruses, DNA and pop art unlock a sci-fi pavilion of windows opening to parallel universes.

This Through the Looking Glass world celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year with a continuing fusion of 3-D art and science in creations called PHSColograms. The tongue-twister (pronounced SKOL-o-grams) is shorthand for digital works that combine photography, holography, sculpture and computer imaging.

"All of our scientific visualizations transcend into art. But you can learn from them and design drugs from them," says Ellen Sandor, the founder, director and driving force behind (art)<sup>n</sup> since she opened the doors with a few other 3-D visionaries in 1983. Sandor developed the PHSColograms over the years with a sculpture's eye and a hip, computer-savvy staff.

The kinetic visualizations shimmer throughout the cavernous (art)<sup>n</sup> studio. The pieces – backlit in lightboxes – collapse into surfaces as dark and barren as a blank TV screen as soon as the lights go off. But illuminated, the images immerse you.

Scientists from NASA, the National Institutes of Health, universities and private industry followed the digital alchemy to this futuristic enclave where they collaborate with (art)<sup>n</sup> to interpret math formulas into a cascade of color and form and render DNA as a double-stranded swirl that resembles a diamond necklace.

"This is a marriage of art and science," says Sandor. "Scientists coveted this right away."

Some came with hopes of developing medications. PHSColograms can help visualize new facets of viruses and cells, as though they have climbed out of the microscope with gemlike precision and new revelations. But PHSColograms mesmerized artists, too. Landreth, an ardent digital explorer, collaborated with (art)<sup>n</sup> to create "Franz K." and other works based on stills from his short animated movies.

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The late Ed Paschke, internationally acclaimed maestro of Chicago pop art, temporarily traded his paintbrush for a computer stylus to generate hybrid (art)<sup>n</sup> sculptures based on his paintings, just as his painting ignited hybrid spoofs of mass media. The vibrant colors of their masklike PHSCologram “No Fumare por Favore” (“No Smoking Please”) offers a high-voltage flashback to his urban cabaret of chararers, and the piece is currently on view at The Art Institute of Chicago.

In other works, the cartoon cosmos of Chicago artists Karl Wirsum and Mr. Imagination leap to life with seemingly touchable objects that dance to the beat of binocular vision.

(art)<sup>n</sup> interns Christopher Day and Michael Siegel, students at the School of the Art Institute, demonstrated how the process works on a recent visit. It starts with a 3-D wireframe digital “object,” such as an iconic scene of downtown Chicago. A skin of color, texture and consummate artistry is applied. And then (art)<sup>n</sup> makes a leap of pure magic with the collective’s proprietary software that “photographs” the digital scene from 64 different perspectives and interweaves the images. A “hard copy” print-out, viewed from beneath a line screen, delivers the dramatic illusion of depth and motion.

“Disney, eat your heart out,” Sandor quips as she surveys her studio.

Many pieces belong to museums and collectors that include singer Elton John. (art)<sup>n</sup> tells the story of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish history in a PHSCologram installation at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City and delivers diamond atoms the size of basketballs to stand with the Hope Diamond at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C.

Sandor, a youthful and wiry 60-something, serves on the board of governors at the School of the Art Institute. Her husband, Richard Sandor, chairman and CEO of the Chicago Climate Exchange, founded this pioneering market to allow emitters to trade their greenhouse gases for offsets provided by the agricultural, forestry and other industries.

The couple collects art, but Sandor envisions a world of making art. She believes a process similar to hers will popularize the creation of 3-D images on home computers. “I think it will be here by the next decade,” she says. “I would have thought we’d have it by now.”

*See it here:* *No Fumare por Favore* is on view through Sept. 7 at the Art Institute of Chicago. Also see PHSColograms at the Smith Museum of Stained Glass at Navy Pier and Midway Airport, where the “Battle of Midway Memorial” is on view in Concourse A. For appointments at (art)<sup>n</sup>, call Ellen Sandor at (312) 432-1870 or visit [www.artn.com](http://www.artn.com).