

Better Art Through Circuitry

A scientist at N.Y.U.'s Center for Advanced Technology discusses the interface between technology and art — and why she named her daughter E.

Q: One of the most striking applications of technology today is yours: you're a technoartist. Could you start by describing one of your pieces, called "Suicide Box"?

The Suicide Box is a motion-detection video system that was situated for a hundred days in the vicinity of the Golden Gate Bridge. It watched the bridge constantly when there was vertical motion, and it captured that on video.

It captured vertical motion — I think you're saying it recorded people leaping to their deaths. But it — you — didn't intervene?

I'm just the engineer, but yes, it did intervene, by generating information about a tragic social phenomenon that is otherwise not seen. The mechanics of having the sensor go off and release some big arm to catch these people is beyond my ability to implement.

Were the bridge authorities aware of the box?
Oh, yes, I spoke to them repeatedly.

And did they ever ask to see your findings?

No, never. And when the video was shown at the Whitney Biennial, the most common audience reaction was, "Look, it's a Sony!"

How does the art-world establishment respond to what you do?

The art world is a very prissy little thing over in the corner, while the major cultural forces are being determined by technoscience. The whole way we imagine ourselves is being redefined, and the art world is still talking about gender politics or whatever without taking on big corporate biotechnical advances. Technology is a language that is much less about privilege, it's much less intimidating conceptually than art criticism — one knows how to use a computer keyboard. So using familiar

materials to encourage people to think about issues. That's my strategy.

Well, I'm not sure everyone finds technology so approachable. But graffiti artists used to be thought of as vandals, and then suddenly they were enshrined in galleries. Do you think hacking is a form of technoart?

There are many types of hacking going on, and it has been demonized in a very interesting, very complete and comprehensive way. I certainly use viruses in my work. The Stump Project is a virus. It's a memory-resonant program that watches your printer queue, counting the number of pages you print. When you've consumed a tree's worth of pulp, the printer prints out an image of tree rings. Eventually, pages of the ring images accumulate into a stump, representing the forest you've consumed — so you know.

Though God knows you're not the traditional environmentalist — tree good, computer printer bad.

Yes, I don't follow the romantic approach to environmentalism. But technoart complicates those good/bad issues. I don't think corporations are all bad, but they are guided by profit, which is not always aligned with cultural progress and cultural profit.

What are you working on now?

"Bang-Bang," a set of low-power automated video cameras triggered by ammunition fire. Whenever there's an explosive event, it collects two seconds of video. They're being deployed in places where one would anticipate ammunition activity: East Timor, Kosovo, L.A.

What technological device do you think is most important to everyday life?

Voice-recognition chips. For the first time, we have to hear ourselves talking to technology. But we don't yet have the capacity just to talk to things. I mean, you talk to things, you're considered mad. So there's this moment in history, right now, where we're starting to talk to our things, and in so doing we have to acknowledge their social roles, we have to treat them like social actors as opposed to neutral tools. We have to hear ourselves saying command-control type things instead of dialogue.

You named your baby E. Why E? Was it data-derived? Was there a consonant in the running?

E is an interactive name. She gets to decide what she stands for. Though that's really a post-rationalization; we had a lot of E names, but we couldn't agree, so we just stopped with E. She'll probably decide on something quite normal, but in the interim it's E for entropy.

— Courtney Eldridge

Photograph by Graham MacIndoe