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Thinking Outside of the Box

by

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I was digitally illiterate when I arrived at RIT (Rochester Institute of Technology). I had avoided using any form of digital technology that was more advanced than a word processor.¹ The reasons for my techno-phobia are not so clear cut, but more of a gut feeling. The only influences I had for my art were books from the local library and bookstores. I was surrounded by Ansel Adams and Alfred Steiglitz. Another early favorite of mine was Jerry Uelsman. Uelsmann has been able to perfect the art of photomontage. he is able to make a seamless print using multiple negatives and enlargers. If he did not need a computer, neither did I.² These photographers who had proceeded me did not need the computer to fix their mistakes. They were able to develop the necessary knowledge and skills needed to make breathtaking and sensual images. I wanted to attain an equal mastery of the medium. Taking the easy road is not the way towards enlightenment.

When I arrived at RIT, I was pretty full of myself. I had been accepted into the best graduate school in the nation, and probably the world for photography.³ I became very comfortable with my knowledge of photography as a

¹ With my illegible handwriting, I, and my teachers, quickly realized what a valuable communication tool a word processor could be.
³ So says US News and World Report, in their annual best-buys in academia report. Unfortunately, nobody knew the school’s reputation in my town, so nobody could appreciate my accomplishment. When I said that I was going to graduate school at RIT, I usually got blank looks. I had to tell people that is one of the best photography schools in the country before they would congratulate me.
medium, and my ability to manipulate this medium to suit my personal vision. So, with this new-found confidence, and furthering my education at a technical school, I decided that now was the time to see if this digital thing was to my liking, and what it could do for me.

I began to see this digital realm as an extension of photography. I found myself very fascinated with this off-shoot of the photographic medium. I now see, in hind sight, that my fascination with the digital aspect of photography was product of my quest for knowledge of all things photographic. I was not concerned about the validity or ethics of the digital image. I wanted only to master this aspect of photography.

In my search for all knowledge of the photographic, I have run into the Great Wall of China. This boundary extends to my left and right toward each horizon, and beyond. The wall is not very high, in fact I have already shimmied up and am standing on top of this wall. I believe I know what Jesus Christ must have felt when standing on that mountain, and the Devil was tempting him. Do you think that the devil only offered Christ one view, that which was in front of them, or did they look all around? When I look behind me, I see a world that I am comfortable in. I am secure in my knowledge of photography. If I can envision it, then I can create it. On the other side of this wall, is the Digital Realm. I am free to descend into this land.

To succeed in this world, I will need to put behind me all of the traditional ways of photography. This realm is a rapidly changing and challenging. The medium lends its democratizing powers to all computer users. I would be at a momentary disadvantage, in that I would have to play a game of catch-up with those who have been here longer. Where I would have to catch up is somewhat of an unusual place. I would need to simply buy the newest equipment, which would probably be obsolete with the first week that I own it.

Computer hardware is rarely backwards engineered. As new technological advances are made, the older technologies are left by the roadside to gather dust. Computer software is another story. It is common place to use the old version as a building block upon which improvements are to be made. If you are familiar with any of the previous versions of software, you can expect to be up and running on the newest release in a short time. This method has a bad effect also. It allows bad designs and technical problems to linger longer than normal, because they are still usable resources.
The medium of photography has not changed dramatically since the advent of color photography. Technology has improved the colors, tonalities, lenses, etc. But the base knowledge that is required to make photographs has not changed. You might call photography a stagnant technology, but I am satisfied with the results I can pull from it. I am free to be creative and have only to hone my imagination and a few manual procedures. In time, the entire act of photography becomes less of a step-by-step process and operates at a more instinctual level.

In the digital world, this is not the case. There is no rest. You have to divide your time between the act of creation, and the act of learning. Nobody is happy with MacPaint images and aliased text. To be current is to be cutting edge. This state requires the person to know all of the new advances in these technologies, to be able to acquire them, and to adapt his/her art to them. There is no one periodical or web site that one can peruse in order to maintain a grasp on the current level of technology. The way to keep up is to read many journals, find and communicate with others who share your interests, and get on as many mailing lists as possible for product releases and updates.

Just keeping up with the current level of technology is still not enough. Who knows how these technologies work? I know how AC and DC currents flow, what some of the electronic components are, and what they are supposed to do. But I could not build a television. I am reasonably confident that I can fix my car if it breaks. The car works on very simple scientific principals. The only things I do not try to fix are the brakes, transmission and carburetor only because they are complex and I do not have the proper tools or space to do the work properly. I am trying to illustrate that for someone who is pretty autonomous, the thought of having to depend on cold circuitry is not an easy one to swallow. To say that you know how these technological objects work, by using electricity and digital signals, is like saying you know how cars work: by using gasoline. This totally ignores many things like internal combustion, inertia, and the rest of Newton's basic laws of physics.
I can easily see the exciting challenge in all of this, trying to understand how this digital world runs. But, I have no reason to reject my analog(photographic) way of working. I enjoy it. I feel that to gain as much freedom with the digital medium as I have in photography, I will have to sacrifice all other avenues of creation. To be competent in the digital realm would mean that I would have no time for photography or any other medium. This solution is unacceptable.

Due to the constant creation and discussion of my art, I became more aware of my work, and I realized that the digital projects I have completed are the weaker pieces of all my art. I am not satisfied with the results that I have gotten. Perhaps I may just need more practice to develop my skill in this area. However, I do not believe that this is the correct solution. I feel that I lack a certain way of working/thinking which the digital medias require. I have a hard enough time trying to read such magazines as WIRED, or RES 4. These magazines break all of the design rules and follow a certain digital aesthetic which is developing in cyberspace. Elements of this aesthetic contain eye popping colors, funky, illegible type, and multiple texts occupying the same space. I am as equally disappointed in the WWW(World Wide Web). Even when you can get to the text you want to read, it is very obvious when an article was written for the Web. I have found that the trend for the written word on the WWW is to keep the word count short and the entertainment value high. It may be a story of sour grapes, but I began to question the medium of digital technology.5

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4 WIRED is a magazine that deals with the techno/popular culture. The specialty magazine RES is all about digital filmmaking.

5 In this instance, I write digital technology, but for the most part, when I write technology, I am referring to the newer digital technologies, and other technologies that lend themselves to communication. VR(Virtual Reality) and the WWW are two good examples.
As I thought more about the digital medium, I came up with several questions which (although are not new to the debate of what, exactly, art is) are all the more troublesome in respect to digital work. Right and wrong continuously pop up. As an artist, I cannot bring myself to say that it is wrong to use any particular medium. To do so would be to limit the tools available to artists. I also wonder about the validity of digital works. I struggle continuously with the question of what happens to a work of art that has no physical presence? When there is no object.?6 Doesn't this counter-act the whole of the “art world”? I am not necessarily an advocate for all those Soho galleries, but they seem as good as any method to weed out the roses from the radishes.

My questioning soon moved from digital art to the broader topic of technology and its impact on the world around us.7 In earlier projects, I wanted to build what I thought were simple machines. But, this task was not as easy as it sounds. I have not yet been able to find a person who can take raw parts and, with no instructions, put them together in a way so that they perform as prescribed. I asked countless people for help, but they seem either annoyed to have a pesky student asking silly questions, or they could not understand why I would want to use their widget for some purpose other than for what it was designed for. If people are this limited in their thinking about simple machinery, I wondered what they thought of digital technologies.

I also realized that we are developing more and more technologies, most of them intended for communication and/or convenience. This leads into my biggest concern about technology - that it is making human contact obsolete. For the ease and convenience that these technologies provide us, we are willing to give up a portion of the experience that goes along with interacting with another human being.

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6 I want to here interject that I am not as concerned with copyright issues, fair usage, etc. I believe that the world is rich enough not to need to steal/borrow/appropriate other artist’s work for one’s own needs.

7 One could say that I am taking the easy way out by ignoring these questions that I have brought up, but I can only see any debate over these questions boiling down to a “Yes, it is! / No, its not!” shouting match. Besides, as I stated before, it seems silly to limit one’s self in the ways of creating art. Why not leave every opportunity open?
These lines of questioning brought my work to where it is now. My thesis show has several themes running through it. The biggest is the question of how much of ourselves are we giving up as we embrace these new technologies. Followed by how well this technology is understood? And lastly, what is happening to art when it begins incorporating these latest technologies?

My show existed in a physical space of two rooms. The first room was painted black and covered with a black plastic ceiling. The entry way was covered in black plastic. In this room the lighting was subdued so that a video projection could be seen. The video was a totally digital production and was only output to the analog VHS 1/2 inch tape for convenience of operation. The video was mainly of vinyl tubes that contained a viscous brown liquid that was being pumped rhythmically through them, the innards of a computer, a television tube, and

This was the view that presented itself as the viewer first stepped into the room. Throughout the installation, I made no attempt to hide extension cords and such.

VHS 1/2 inch tape for convenience of operation. The video was mainly of vinyl tubes that contained a viscous brown liquid that was being pumped rhythmically through them, the innards of a computer, a television tube, and

8 I am a proud owner of a Sony CPJ-100 LCD video projector, NTSC format. I like this small machine in its elegant cylindrical design, and that it can produce an image 4x6" to an image that is 60" at the diagonal. 60" is what the technical specifications claim is the largest image you can project and still retain optimal image quality. I found that I could push that size a lot further, with only a small loss in contrast. Of course the images I am projecting are very contrast and not of cinematic quality.

9 I say ease of operation, in that all I had to do with the VCR was to make an eight hour tape that I had dubbed my video, which lasts eight and one half minutes, on to. So I had a video that would play for eight hours. I also programmed the VCR to automatically rewind and begin playing the tape again, in case the tape was not rewound, or if the gallery was actually open for more than eight hours at a time. To do this on the computer would not have been hard, Adobe Premier can loop a video and repeat it endlessly. But to do that I would have to bring in my $3000+ computer, leave it in the gallery, and trust the sitters to be able to follow detailed instructions as how to turn it on, open the file which contains the video, and get Premier to play it in a looped fashion. So as I said, it was easier to put the video onto an analog tape.
a *Visible Man*. The video was very low resolution, or pixelized\(^{10}\). Also in the room were several framed prints and two sculptural pieces. The prints were of the same subject matter that the video contained: television, computer and typewriter parts. They were shot on Kodak's *Vericolor Slide Film* \(^{11}\). The images were taken in my basement which I had turned into a sort of workshop or laboratory. Originally, I was going to try to re-create this workshop in the gallery. But as time and money passed, I realized that this idea was not feasible.

The sculptures both dealt with one's senses and/or the organs used to perceive sensual information. The first sculpture was a computer monitor with hundreds of wires sticking out of the space that the screen would normally be. Inside the monitor flashed a strobe light. The second sculptural piece was a child's phonograph (record player). On top of the turn table was glued a CD-ROM (compact disc read only memory). The CD-ROM was scratched, so that when the needle crossed a scratch, noise was made. In scratching the CD-ROM to be usable by an older technology, I rendered the disc un-useable in the more advanced application it was intended for. Yet, at the same time, I created new information with the scratch.

In the second room, all four walls were covered in thick construction plastic, two of the walls were created solely out of the plastic. In a mosaic upon one wall were five glowing wax pieces\(^{12}\) (backlit with fluorescent tubes, so the

\(^{10}\) The video content was shot with a *Connetix Color Quickcam*. This is a small digital video/still camera that is intended to be used as a TV-telephone type devise. I was constrained in my image making in that the camera has to be attached to the computer by an eight foot cord. The camera's resolution is very low, the picture it produces is very similar to a *Pixelvision* camera, but in color. The *Pixelvision* camera, made by Fisher Price, is a video camera for meant for kids. The camera recorded its footage onto an audio cassette. The images were not full frame, and they were very pixellated.

\(^{11}\) Despite the name this is a C-41 process negative film, but it has a clear base, which tends to throw the final print’s color off, and increases the contrast dramatically.

\(^{12}\) These pieces were made by constructing a wooden frame, covering one side with my trusty clear construction plastic, and taping the plastic to the frame with duct tape. I the placed the frame on a flat surface, plastic side down. This gave me a sort of box with the top open, I then proceeded to pour enough molten wax (canning paraffin) into this box until I had a one and a half to two inches of wax in the frame. The heat from the plastic would cause the plastic to stretch and wrinkle, thus forming the texture into the wax as the wax dried.
wax would not melt), photos of the artist's hand, pictures of old typewriters and photographs of birds flying and resting upon power/phone lines. Along one of the open walls (the aluminum studs were exposed and covered with plastic) hung giant Rorschach ink blots made with the same clear construction plastic and black paint. On the second wall covered with only the translucent plastic, hung about seven latex rubber castings of every-day technological articles ie: a pc (printed circuit) board, a spanner, a CD (compact disc), light switches, electrical outlets, electrical outlet covers and files. Standing beside this wall was a cubicle composed of exposed 2x4 studs. From the top of this closet sized structure (8'x4'x8') was a small aluminum coy (2'x6'). The cot was suspended by elastic bungee cords. Lying on the cot was a pile of tubes wrapped in plastic. This pile of tubes was pushed and molded into a shape that, when covered in plastic, appeared to be vaguely human. There was also

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13 I had originally wanted a piece that would melt over time, and leave a pool of wax on the floor. I had difficulty finding the proper wire in which to make a heating element, and then I was stuck with the problem of how to not burn the school down.

14 These images of the birds were inspired by Fannie Flagg's novel Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café (page 301). The book and subsequent movie have special significance to me. The story is set in the South, and I enjoy reading books set in the South, especially when I am stuck here in upstate NY. The movie was filmed on location at an old hangout of mine, a small ghost town near where I grew up. This spot has become a tourist attraction and a lot of business have popped up. No longer is it a place for me to explore in silence. But back to the birds and telephone lines. As Mrs. Threadgoode was talking to Evelyn Couch, she said something that struck me as absurd. She commented that the crows that were sitting on the phone lines could hear the conversations through their feet. Mrs. Threadgoode's honest naiveté towards technology makes me wonder how many of people harbor truly misconceived ideas of the way different technologies work.

15 I had originally intended for there to be many more objects (actually multiples of the same castings listed above) hanging here, but as I was installing them, I felt that one of each was a more simple and elegant solution.

16 I saw this cot, at the curb for garbage pick-up one morning while walking. I passed it by, thinking I had too much junk already, but as I continued my walk I was thinking about this item. I eventually doubled back and took the cot home with me.

17 Actuality it was 700 feet of 5/8 OD (outer diameter), 1/2 inch ID (inner diameter) vinyl tubing.
50 feet of latex tubing wrapped around the outside of this mound of tubes. This latex tubing was hooked on one end to a pump, and the other emptied into a bucket of oily water. A short length of vinyl tubing went from the bucket to the pump. The pump would only run when a person was in the room. There was a motion detector hooked into the power supply of the pump so that it would switch on and off as needed.\textsuperscript{18}

This was \textit{not} how I conceived this piece. Originally, I wanted the tubing to be hanging from the top of the structure, and the cot to be underneath the tubes. I wanted the observer to be able to walk through the tubes, having to push handfuls away in order to pass through. This was all fine and good, except that the pump was not strong enough to push 700 feet x \pi (1/4 inch)\textsuperscript{2} of liquid after it left the pump. After sitting in a big puddle of vegetable oil and used motor oil (this is the viscous liquid that fills the tubes) and crying at 3:00 AM. I went home and slept. When I arrived at the gallery the next morning, I was able to solve my problem quite successfully, and my concept became a more powerful piece of art.

On the fourth wall hung, of course, the construction plastic, and on the plastic was hand-written the mathematical proof of what the results are when one divides a number by zero. Beside the equation was a computer program which checks user input and tests whether the computer user is trying to divide by zero. On top of both of these texts hung a computer keyboard. As one looked closer at the keyboard, one would notice that the all of the keys were unidentified. The keyboard is blank.

I admit that my art work does utilize technology, both time tested and cutting-edge. What I am contemplating is two fold: what happens when our ever increasing fascination with technology is carried to the extreme in which art becomes a transient set of electrons with no physical being, and from where does this drive to ever increase our levels of technology come? I want to quickly address, several important issues these questions bring up. When is

\textsuperscript{18} This helped with two things, one to prevent the pump from burning out due to continuous running, and two with the switching on and off, the cot and tubes would start to sway on the bungee cords, giving a sense that there was something underneath the plastic that was causing the assembly to move.
enough enough (in regards to technology)? If we were to re-direct our resources, I’ll bet we could put an end to starvation, poverty, deforestation and the depletion of the ozone layer. But we do not. Instead we try to build planes that cannot be electronically detected and virtual worlds that may or may not follow the laws of nature as we know them. This seems to be a key point - technology is helping us escape reality by providing alternate realities and by removing us from personal contact with each other.

Nicholas Negroponte, in his 1995 best-selling book Being Digital, states his desire for technology to become transparent, for digital media and agents to be present and working silently for us constantly. I will fully admit that technology does become transparent, or at least surpassed by newer technologies. The making of paper is technology, but it will soon be obsolete. What scares me is the fact that as technology starts working for us, and as it becomes more evolved, the knowledge of how things work will move from the general public to a select few. I am not sure what scares me more, having to trust digital agents to work for me, or having to trust the men behind them. Have we really begun to put these creators in a place of power? Bill Gates and Steve Jobs are two very influential men who started out as normal techies. Now they have money and power. And when something breaks, something that belongs to the government, say, who will the government look to for help, and who will have the upper hand? It is a line used in many science fiction and drama movies, “I made you, I can destroy you!”

Back to my work, and its subsequent installation. I had a good idea of how the work was to be installed, but when it came time for actually installing the work, I ran into major difficulties. Things took longer than I expected because I had to problem-solve on the fly. I realize for the next time I decide to create an installation, I need to create the work within the space in which it will be installed, or I need to have a space large enough in which to create a practice installation before the real installation goes up. This way, I can play with the pieces in relation to each other, and discover many of the problems and overcome them with less stress and with more time to ponder the solutions.
I did not originally intend for this show to be an installation, but after working on all of these pieces in the same environment (my basement), I thought that displaying them in a clean/sterile gallery would subtract from the work as a whole. The SPAS Gallery is a very neutral space, smooth white walls and a cement floor. Many of the visitors who saw my basement studio remarked on how it had a mad scientist feel to it. As an alternative to the chaos of a manic-prone scientist's workshop, I chose to try to work with the sterility of the gallery space. The plastic that covered most of the walls in the installation helped create a sense of a laboratory or some other type of sterile or contained environment.19

![The clean plastic environment in ET, versus the chaos of my basement workshop.](image)

In the first room, the video was projected upon an old movie projection screen. As you will find with most of my work from this project, there are several aspects of each piece. The screen refers to the older technologies of the home movie camera and slide show.20 Slides and slide shows were, for many years, the family snapshot photo album. The projector was only

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19 My first encounter with a representation/presentation of this type of environment was in the movie *ET*. I can still remember the cold feeling I got when they had *ET* enclosed in that temporary structure made entirely out of plastic. (This feeling I got may have been due to the fact that we all thought *ET* was dead, but he pulled through!)

20 I can still remember the smell of my parent's and grandparents' movie screens and projectors. They were somewhat musky for they were stored in some closet and only brought out into a darkened room for special occasions, when family was visiting. Then the bulb would be turned on, and you could smell the dust burn that had collected on the bulb since, what was probably our last visit. I always enjoyed being able to operate the
brought out when the slides came back from the photo lab or when company came over. In either circumstance, there was normally several people present in the room, reminiscing and sharing common memories with each other. The screen in my installation was set so that several people could view it. There were even a couple of chairs to sit in. As I have described above, the environment of my installation was anything but a family gathering spot. A living room it is not. The screen in my installation was used to display images from a source which used a much higher level of technology (not quite cutting-edge) to project and create the images.

remote control. The forward and backwards buttons were fun, but the button that fascinated me was the focus. Actually, it was not even a button. It was more of a slider switch. I enjoyed hearing after each click-clack of the slides being ejected and the next dropping into place, the whirring sound of the auto focus. The images would shimmer slightly, and the pop out into razor sharp focus. When the adults began talking about the image, or the memories associated with it, I began my experiments. I would begin to shift the focus in and out. If I was not asked to stop, I would then proceed to change the focus until only colored blobs were visible. I tried to find the point that I could recognize the people or places in the image. I would try to squint, stare, or even push on my eyeballs in attempt to make the out of focus images become sharp again. Since then I have gotten older, and I trust my doctor when he tells me I have 20/20 vision, but I always wonder if it is not possible to see things even sharper than I do now? Who can tell?
The projected images had two themes running through them also. In the video, there were references to the body and to the physical manifestation of technologies. The hoses had liquid pumping through them at an interval to suggest the heartbeat and blood or some other bodily fluid flowing rhythmically. There was a Visible Man, except this one had no innards, and bandages covered its face and torso. This damaged and repaired shell shows my apprehension of how we are losing touch with the sensual experiences

21 The whole concept of the living room is a strange one to me. This room, in my family and my friend's families, was a room off limits for general use. This room contained our finest furniture and china. Yet when company came over, this room was suddenly put into use. It is kind of like when your grandmother comes to visit, your mother always says the house is a wreck, when she spent many hours cleaning it. This is an example of how we try to present our private lives to outsiders, and how the visitor takes a willing part in the illusion.

22 As I was growing up, I can remember coming across several of these Visible Men, but I can never remember seeing one that was full assembled, if at all. The ones that were partially assembled were strangely held together with a tiny bit of glue along the edges of the shell, but the rest of its “parts” were just laying loose on the inside, free to move about.

23 Visible Man by Skilcraft: ANATOMICALLY ACCURATE UNASSEMBLED MODEL KIT; MODEL CONTAINS: SKELETON • VITAL ORGANS • EYES • OUTER SKIN WITH MAJOR VEINS AND ARTERIES • BRAIN • DISPLAY STAND. kit no. 74622
that man has historically experienced. There are fewer and fewer face-to-face conversations. Handwriting is becoming uncommon to see. I fear that, instead of the futurists’ dream of technology becoming more transparent, we as humans are losing something of ourselves, becoming transparent, empty shells. To put this into a digital perspective, I fear that humans are becoming icons of our former selves. We are only a small image that represents the fullness and complexity of the human existence/experience in the past.

The next two items I wish to discuss from the first room of my installation are the two sculptural works. The computer monitor is the easiest one to relate to. Who has not sat in front of a computer monitor long enough to feel as if your eyeballs were being sucked out of your head by this display device? There was a big flap about radiation being given off by the monitors that was causing eye damage and cancer. So now there are low-radiation monitors. But isn’t it silly to damage your eyes while looking at a device used to help you see (what you’re typing, what the com-

24 This brings to mind another common theme in science fiction. The urge for a man to merge, or download himself (his thoughts/mind) into a computer. Now why and the hell anybody would want to do that is beyond me. I like to travel, to run through the fields, to swim through cold crystal clear water... You get the drift. Now they say that humankind only uses a small percent of its brain, but do you really think that a person could cope with today’s computing power? The mid/top end of processing power is 230mhz. That means the computer can perform 230,000,000 operations per second. Even if we could throw away our shell, or meat, of the body, I think that once with in the space of the digital realm we would find only a sad second to what sensual experiences we had IRL (In Real Life).

25 An icon is simple a very small file, usually descriptive, but mostly empty, that points to where the main file full of information is located on the computer.
puter is doing etc.). Another aspect that I find puzzling, is why, if these monitors hurt your eyes, and have a low resolution of 72 dpi (dots per inch) would anyone want their art work displayed on them?

The second object which used technology in an unintended way is the record player. The CD sits on the turntable spins around making soft clicking and scratching noises. Obviously, the CD is ruined. There are several deep scratch-es that I put in it, and as an added bonus, the record player's needle also scratches the surface of the disc. A sound reminiscent of a heartbeat emanates from the phonograph's speakers, along with a the sound of the ocean (like when you hold a shell to your ear).

A CD contains digital data which is meant to be retrieved via laser, I used a needle to retrieve data.\textsuperscript{26} It is interesting that in order to ruin the digital data, I was forced to create data that the phonograph could recognize.\textsuperscript{27} If one were to examine the piece carefully, one would see the rainbow patterns from light reflected off of the CD onto the wall. In one sense, the valuable data that was inscribed by a laser, now becomes a pretty decoration.

\textsuperscript{26} How little of our technology is backwards engineered. A term and practice only recently coined. When a piece of technology becomes obsolete, what happens to it? How many record players and eight track players are there in the garbage heaps?

\textsuperscript{27} I will concede that data recognition is one attractive feature to digital technologies. If I send you digital data, and you have all the necessary applications, it does not matter what the data's form might be. The correct application will open up and play the movie, show the text or say "Hello!". But is this feature not but a convenience?
The photographs in the first room all deal with technological objects. Again, my personal position waxes and wanes within my art on the subject of technology. The objects are all pieces of some bigger mechanism, which the viewer may or may not recognize. I am intrigued by the complexity of these objects and am aware that some person designed and put them (at least the prototypes) together. These parts have a plethora of components and wires. The color of each item has meaning and purpose. They are smooth and
efficiently placed into as small a space as possible. These components are not
designed by an artist, but most likely, by some engineer (mechanical, electrical,
or computer). These are the folks for whom the phrase "form follows
function" has always been the way - not a revolutionary way, just the one
and only way. To photograph these objects is to point out their efficiency and
design. At the same time, I am pointing out the starkness and alien quality
they have. Where is the artist’s/creator’s hand, and can one look at such
items and determine its use/function?

The Rorschach prints in the second room help illustrate this point. There is no
function involved in the prints, but we humans can always use our imagina-
tions to see some sort of representational image within the prints.28
Rorschach prints are also known as ink blots. They are made by pouring some
ink onto a piece of paper, folding the paper in half, and then opening the
paper. The resulting random, mirrored image is then used to ask people what
they see in the image. There is no active creation process on the part of the
artist, yet we humans can read into the prints and mentally push them into
something (an image) that is not there. Can anyone not initiated into the
world of microcircuitry look at a circuit board and come up with its function?

28 My inkblots, were actually paint blots. They were created in my basement, on con-
struction plastic. I used acrylic paint, and a hardener to help the paint adhere to the
plastic. Ironically the artist’s hand did not play as important role in creating these
prints as did my feet. I used my feet to smear the paint and press the two halves of the
plastic together!
Can anyone look at the same board and say that they see Elvis, or a cow? All I can do is look at the pretty colors and designs to try to delve deeper into the object is to stare balefully at it. If I were to come across a PC board within a piece of equipment, I would assume that it had importance. In fact, I would assume it was controlling the object I was examining. But take the same board out of its technological environment, and I would assume it is junk. I cannot access it as an technological object of import or meaning.

My photographs in the first room and the latex castings in the second room do lend these technological objects an air of meaning. The very fact that I chose to reproduce them raises them to a level of importance that they never had. The objects are now subjects of communication as opposed to agents aiding in communication. The technology is not transparent anymore, I have turned the boxes inside out and displayed the guts. But does it change anything? The objects, now aesthetic objects, still do not lend themselves to interpretation as to their functionality or utilitarianism.
The wax pieces, like the Rorschach prints, are unrepresentational and force the viewer to make aesthetic or metaphorical assumptions or judgments. To me, these glowing masses represent ether. The word ether has been used to describe the air and outer space, through which radio signals pass. Yet another way to look at the pieces, is to see them as a representation of cyberspace. As we communicate via digital technologies, the signal we send out is broken up in to smaller parts know as packets and sent out into the web. Like a real spider web, there are hundreds of ways for this information to reach its destination, and not all of the packets take the same route. When you receive information from the Internet, it is similar to receiving an idea. Yes, there is a computer somewhere that contains the data, but you do not have to know where it is or what it is called Just point and click. The information appears in what is ideally a timely fashion. The vast distances that are covered are not alluded to in any way.

29 Timely is a very subjective term, with all the techno-babble aside, there are times when information retrieval is fast, like during the work day, and at night the whole system slows down as people surf in their spare time. Weird isn’t it? That people involved in their jobs, do not use this as much as their private lives. Where is information more valuable, in the business/work world or in your home?
Amongst the wax pieces, latexed onto the plastic, hung images of hands. Both the palm and the back of the hand were displayed. This is my hand, at a basic level, and as a little pun on my part, these images do contain the artist’s hand. The fact that the artist’s hand did not appear in photographs was one early argument against photography as an art form. I am also referring back to the body. The latex that covered and adhered the images to the wall has a very tactile surface. It feels as if the images are covered in sheath of skin. Like a body, these images are going to fade and will cease to exist as images.30

The images of the birds (mostly crows) amongst the telephone wires are also about the ether. As humans, we have limited a large amount of our communication and contact with each other to what can be transmitted through these cables. Yet here is another form of life which is totally ignorant to what is going on. They fly through the same air that our radio signals travel through. Our wire-based communications are but convenient resting places. These birds are able to retain their bird’s eye view of us humans, thanks to our inventiveness. These crows represent a life unfettered by technology and all of the complications it arouses. They are free to roam the air/ether. There are no boundaries.31 They enjoy the wind blowing through their feathers, eating juicy bugs etc. If you do not believe me, just go outside an look up at them, listen. They will tell you how silly we are.32

30 The latex has some pretty corrosive elements in it, ammonia for one, that cause the prints to turn brown and the begin to fade away. This appeals to me, I enjoy seeing the piece change as time goes by. This brings to mind one of my favorite artist, Edvard Munch. He had a technique/habit, in which he would put his paintings out of doors for months or years until his “horse treatment” as he called produced a far superior piece than he could have created on his own. This techniques has given conservationists many headaches while attempting to preserve Munch’s canvases. I have one up on old Edvard though, I am dealing with photographs. As long as I hold on to the negatives I can always make another.

32 How ironic is it that we have created most of the so called rules of nature? I wonder what we would be like if we had three of everything, instead of being bilateral, what if we were trilateral. What I purpose is that if we had three of everything, we probably would not think digitally (on - off/ 1 - 0, that is what digital is). I wonder what type of technologies and computing power we would have if there were three states (1-2-3)? Whenever I purpose this to a computer person they look at me as if I am crazy. They say that is impossible! They cannot think outside of the box, except that the box is not the office, it is our bodies and how the human body has forced us to deal with things in twos.
Moving from the mosaic of the wax and latex photographs to the other mosaic in the room, to that of the handwriting on the plastic and the keyboard, we shift from the methods of communication to the mode of communication, language. And, of course, that is not the only theme present. I have mentioned earlier that I felt as if handwriting is becoming more uncommon in today’s world. I purposely wrote the computer program and mathematical proof by hand. It looks out-of-place in the gallery. It is not neat, nor does its aesthetic lend any import to the contents of the writing. I chose the two texts in order to illustrate the different languages which are spoken among us. The languages used within these texts is English. But these texts assume that you are an initiate into the obscure knowledge that they attempt to build upon. The mathematical proof is not a hard one to understand, in that it comes from

\[33\] I cannot, of course, be sure that is what they are saying, but I am always envious of their carefree playfulness. Not only with crows, but with all animals, their body is their life. If a bird cannot fly, it will not last long on the ground. For us humans, the body is something that is archaic, something in constant need of shoring up. Many people pay great homage to the computer for it allows us to hide our bodies, if not make us a equal in some way.
a basic Algebra textbook. It is geared to address persons who are not familiar with the subject. Of course, if a viewer has no experience with the higher maths, I think that this proof would be as confusing as the second one. This other text is written in JAVA, the most recent, adaptable, and therefore promising programming languages to date. This programming language, like other programming languages I have seen, uses English in a way which one can almost decipher the meaning of the text. These languages use words such as “put”, “get”, and “tell”. And this is, in a way, what the computer is doing. But to decipher the text, one needs to be a programmer, or at least have a Teach Yourself Java in 21 Days book by your side.

These examples are languages of technology. They may be somewhat decipherable to some people, but these examples are very basic. To truly know these languages is to be able to manipulate them. Something a relatively small amount of people can do. The key to technology is right here. But can we read it?

The blank keyboard goes right along with this theme of indecipherability. Here is what is now a common item but for, I suspect, many people, unusable. There are no letters on the keys. The operating language of the keyboard, the symbols we call the alphabet, have been removed. Seeing as how the keyboard is the main interface to our computers, if the keyboard were unusable, the computer becomes a very large paperweight. The keyboard helps to illustrate the fact that so much of our technology is hidden, made to be transparent, or just not understood by the general public.

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34 Of course, if you saw the work, you would, like all of my teachers thank the Gods of Technology for allowing us a the technologies of the word processor... My handwriting is pretty bad. I blame the public school system. I should have never been allowed to leave grammar school with such bad handwriting. I think that I was born left handed, but I was forced to become right handed, as was the trend back then. Of course bad handwriting is rampant amongst my immediate family, so I am probably waxing a little romantic in my fantasy of victimization.

35 JAVA is well becoming the language to know. It works on a unique principal, as long as certain software resources are present on the computer, the code will work on any computer. The language does this by creating a virtual machine. This machine tells your computer what to do via the software resources. This is a pretty impressive step forward, it will help homogenize the digital realm.
Much of technology, transparent or not, is being created out of the need for convenience. These new technologies are not necessary for our continued existence. In fact, new technologies are making our bodies more obsolete. The last piece of the installation was the human-like form on the cot suspended in the air. The form was inert, except for liquid within the latex tubing which was being circulated by a motion activated pump. This piece embodies my fear that we are moving away from the sensual aspects of our being towards a colder, logic-based way of living. All computer programs work on logic, and there are only two choices available within the computer, yes or no. There are no maybes, or a little of each. Another such logic-based world, is in Gene Roddenberry’s Star Trek series. The Vulcans in Roddenberry’s universe were completely logical. There was no humor among them, and it seemed as if humans (typified by Bones, the ship’s doctor) were always pulling out their hair when trying to deal with the Vulcan’s inscrutable logic and apparent absence of feelings. Before you say anything, remember that Mr. Spock was only half Vulcan - he was also half human. His struggle for balance between his heritage is very similar to my struggle for balance between the sensual world of art and the attractive, democratizing powers of the digital world.

Moving away from the sensual is moving away from our bodies. With, perhaps, the exception of the often talked about, but never proven sixth sense, our bodies are responsible for taking all of the stimuli from the world and interpreting it into signals we can understand. Digital technologies are trying to emulate these stimuli.
Even without realizing the absurdity and futility of recreating the physical world within a digital one, there are many people who see this transition into being digital as a step forward in our evolution. I say that these actions are absurd and futile in that I can get no logical response from my question of "Why?" With the exception of behavior modeling, CAD (computer aided design) and other laboratory type testing, I see no real need for humans to create a virtual world in which to reside or to place art.

Roy Ascott, believes otherwise:

The technology of these transformative systems fulfills a profound human desire: to transcend the limitations of the body, time and space: to escape language, to defeat metaphors of self and identity that alienate and isolate, that imprison mind in solipsistic systems. Our need is to fly, to reach out to touch, connect - to expand our consciousness by a dissemination of our presence, to distribute self into a larger society of mind. That is the future of art...

I would ask that Mr. Ascott speak for only himself. I have no desire for any of that which he purposes. His writing seems to promise (and borrow from) as much as the telephone companies’ slogan “Reach out and touch someone.” An empty promise of intimate contact from a distance through new technologies.

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38 Except for flying, but I mean that I would like to be able to fly in the sky like a comic book character, not the metaphorical flying through the data-space that Mr. Ascott writes of.
“By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs.”39 What Donna Haraway means by this statement is that through our increasing use of technology, human beings have move on from being human—to being cyborgs. Another term commonly used to describe the same idea is “post-human”. Because of our use of pharmaceuticals, x-rays, computers, phones, building materials, etc., we have attained a level of being beyond what would be possible for us in nature. I see two holes in this theory. The first is that Haraway has neglected to take into account the fact that what makes us human beings is our ability to think and use tools. Extending Haraway’s logic, the first human to use a tool, was also the first cyborg. I would argue that this event would define the first human. So what tools and skills belong to the human realm, and what belong to the cyborg world? I am at a loss as to where to draw the line, and Haraway ignores the whole issue. The second issue is that Haraway, by defining us as cyborgs, is assuming that the human (cyborg) race is outside of nature. Just because we have created all this technological mess, does not mean it isn’t natural. In an interview with WIRED magazine, Haraway tries to sweep such considerations under the rug. “To any of the usual good/bad, nature/nurture, right/wrong, biology/society arguments, she smiles... and reminds us that the world is ‘messier than that’.40 Our world may not be as simple as the environs around Walden Pond, but I think that we can find a much happier medium between Thoreau’s world and Haraway’s world.41

Through all of my readings and research into the issues of cyberspace, art and the body, the most common reference I come across it to William Gibson’s science fiction novel, Neuromancer.42 In this book, Gibson coined the term cyberspace. But in this book and subsequent others, Gibson has done


41 Henry Davis Thoreau wrote Walden in 1854. Walden is a contemplation of nature and man’s place in nature.

42 As much as I have seen this book quoted, analyzed, and referenced, I cannot help but to conclude that this a seminal text in the cult of cyberspace.
more than develop a new slang or lingo for the growing masses of cyber-punks.\textsuperscript{43} Gibson’s visions of the future are actually molding the future. Just 6 years after the writing of his book, there were several institutions, business and academic, which were actively developing technologies to bring Gibson’s vision to reality.\textsuperscript{44} If one were to read Gibson’s ideas of the future and compare them to the development of computer networks, his future may seem to be the logical conclusion of the ongoing development of computer networks and how humans interface with these networks.

What I find disturbing is a fact. A fact that is largely ignored by these proclaimers of a new breed of being—“post-human.” In a video documentary William Gibson candidly admits to having written his early novels on a manual typewriter. “\textit{When I started writing this stuff, I had never touched a computer, and I think it gave me a certain, strange edge in terms of imagination, in that I wasn’t really hindered as to what was possible.”}\textsuperscript{45}

In the same interview Gibson shows how far-off his conception of computers really was at the time when he relates a story of buying his first computer: “I got it home, set it up, and turned it on and it made this weird noise.” After placing a service call, Gibson was informed that the noise he was hearing was simply the disk drive working. “\textit{I thought that they [computers] were these crystalline engines. Then I realized that it was a piece of clumsy Victorian technology spinning a little plastic record around}.” As his statements show, Gibson hadn’t a clue when he wrote \textit{Neuromancer}. Yet his ideas now shape the future of digital technologies.

The concepts that Gibson devised is proof of how limitless the power of the imagination can be. This work was produced by one man, one mind. How ironic is it that this book, the product of one man’s genius is to be the very downfall of the artist as an individual or of human-kind’s appreciation for lush narrative works of the printed word.

\textsuperscript{43}Elmer-Dewitt, Phillip, “Cyberpunk”, Time, February 8, 1993, p.59-65
\textsuperscript{44} Cyberpunk, 1990, a documentary directed by Marianne Trench.
\textsuperscript{45} Cyberpunk, 1990, a documentary directed by Marianne Trench.
Kevin Kelly, in his book *Out of Control*, describes a scene from a convention hall. The conventioneers in the audience were given lighted wands in which they could change from green to red. The audience, with little instruction, was asked to play a game of Pong, collectively.

The audience roars with delight. Without a moment’s hesitation 5,000 people are playing a reasonably good game of Pong. Each move of the paddle is the average of several thousand player’s intentions. The sensation is unnerving. The paddle usually does what you intend, but not always. When it doesn’t, you find yourself spending as much attention trying to anticipate the paddle as the incoming ball. One is definitely aware of another intelligence on-line: it’s this hollering mob.46

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Kelly does not propose the demise of the species known as human beings. He
does the developing evolution of machine life on earth. His main point is that
as our technology becomes more complex, we will have to look towards
nature or biology to help maintain the complex systems we are creating. Kelly
believes that the way towards this end is to give machines a life of their own.
To have self-replicating, repairing, and adaptable machines to live beside us
in the world. He says we will have to give up our control of these machines
and learn to co-exist. He believes that together with the machines we will
form a hive mind, with behaviors similar to the example above, to adapt to
our changing environs.

This idea of the hive mind is similar to what Roy Ascott proposes will happen
with art as it moves towards a virtual existence. He writes:

“To interact with it [art], to interface with it, is in part to
define it, to create it. In telematic art there is no creation
without participation, there is no participation without dis-
tribution.”

And: “Art is no longer a linear affair, dealing in harmony,
completion, resolution, closure—a composed and ordered
finality. Instead it open-ended, even fugitive, fleeting, ten-
tative, virtual. Forming rather than formed, it celebrates
process, embodies systems, embraces chaos.”

As I have expressed earlier, I do not like giving up control of my world to
machines, machines built and programmed by someone else. I would much
rather live in this world than in Ascott’s. How and why would there be art?
As an artist, would my job be to think up ideas, and let the rest of the inter-
net create the actual work? What the combined futures of Ascott and Kelly

47 Ascott, Roy, “Connectivity: Art and Interactive Telecommunications,” Leonardo,
remind me of is broadcast TV. Where the masses make programming decisions by their viewing choices. If one network has a very popular show, you can bet that the next season, the others will have some variant.

My response to this vision of the future is a quote from one of my favorite artists, Edvard Munch. He said: “I do not believe in an art that has not forced its way out of man’s need to open his heart.” To me, individuality is what art is all about. I look at art to see what other people have chosen to speak about, to see what they care about, how they present their views, and how they manipulate their chosen medium(s). This may seem an old-fashioned point of view, but when all the posturing is through and set aside, art that is sensual and unique is what can reach in and grab my heart.

William Gibson created an imaginary world which set a goal for what cyberspace should resemble. People have created and are constantly improving upon our current cyberspace. In his book *Uncommon Sense: The Heretical Nature of Science* Alan H. Cromer’s theme is that most new developments in science are, at the time, heresy. Another way of phrasing it is that with each new leap, human beings have had to shift their ways of thinking. Human beings are thinking creatures. We have the power to make choices. I chose to remain human, to be grounded within my body. I accept the intrusions that technology has made in our lives, but I will not define myself as a cyborg. I will happily carry my body along with me wherever I go—I have to, it’s attached to my mind. The only reality I want is the physical world that assaults my body with stimuli non-stop.


- Birkerts, Sven, *The Gutenberg Elegies, the Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, 1994, Boston, Farber and Faber Inc.


- Elmer-Dewitt, Philip, “Cyberpunk”, *Time*, February 8, 1993


Christopher A. May

Blackroom 1997
installation view 1

Monitor 1997
object - 48x12x12

Outlined Bulb 1997
color photo - 20x24

Monitor in window 1997
color photo - 20x24

Sidetube 1997
color photo - 16x20

Glove 1997
color photo - 20x24

Invisible Man 1997
16x42 B&W photo

Waxes 1997
installation

Hand 1997
B&W photo - 16x20