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Collision Of Art and Tripped-Out Technies

Harlem Hosts Wacky Intersection Between Technology and Art

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A papier mâché spaceship with giant green boxing gloves doubling as a defense shield. Flocks of meandering balloons communicating information to each other of their whereabouts. Artistic robots programmed to draw randomly, creating canvases reminiscent of Jackson Pollock.

One might suppose these are designs of some mad, hermetic scientist from a faraway world. In actuality, these works and those of 17 other artists were on display this weekend at the Mink Building in Harlem at the Artbots 2004 exhibition.

Artbots, the brainchild of Columbia University Computer Music Center Director Douglas Repetto, is a showcase of works and interactive pieces that merge art and technology. In its third year, Artbots has grown from a one-day event featuring the work of 10 techno-artists to a three-day affair, with 20 pieces on display.

With co-curators Mark Tribe, of the Columbia University Digital Media Center, and Mary Flanagan, a professor of film and media at Hunter College, Repetto sent out a call to “shifty artists, disgraced engineers, high/low/no tech hackers, rogue scientists, beauty school dropouts, backyard pyros, and industrial espionage ... to define the emerging field of robotic art.”

In the Mink Building’s no-frills warehouse, curious onlookers, techie enthusiasts and small children bustled from bot to bot. In one corner of the room, participants gathered to create their own robots out of plastic cups, markers and basic motors. After completing a robot design, the novice artist could place his work on a giant canvas and watch the robot “draw” swirling patterns unique to his design.



TARA ZABOR FOR SPECTATOR

Robots of every shape, size, and function were present at the Artbots 2004 exhibition at the Mink Building in Harlem this weekend.

Mad Scientists Find Their Artistic Sides in Artbots

ARTBOTS from front page

ogy, but simultaneously invited them to use their creative instincts.

The idea for the exhibition was born out of media hype surrounding television shows like *Battlebots* and *Robot Wars*. While much of the media coverage devoted to robots was centered on these violent television shows, Repetto wanted to inform people that robots could do a lot more

“Art ... should be about the ideas.”

—Douglas Repetto

than just destroy each other. According to Repetto, one of the goals of the exhibit is to de-mystify the worlds of art and technology.

“A lot of times with new media art, people put a lot of effort put into making it this grand, important, sexy, high-tech thing. The art doesn’t have to be like that. It should be about the ideas,” Repetto said. “It’s hard for people to really believe that they’re allowed to just make art without a license.”

In his piece, artist William Tremblay attached four robotic arms to part of the trunk of a downed tree. “The Bionic Log’s” arms flail, much like a wounded person, leaving some viewers distressed at the pathetic log’s gesticulations, and others smirking at the ridiculousness of the display. While onlookers had varied reactions to the work, the piece forces viewers to question the boundaries between animatronic creatures and living things.

Despite the seemingly cerebral nature of his artwork, Tremblay echoes Repetto’s approach to art as an instructive tool that should be accessible to all people.

“It’s hard to see a division between technology and art,” Tremblay said. “[An exhibition like this] provides a venue for technology artists to create work that isn’t necessarily art with a capital A—art that doesn’t alienate people and frighten people in the way that something in a more traditional gallery setting would.”

Artist Remo Campopiano, a member of the collaborative Art Re-envisions Technology, views technological art as a means for learning more about who we are. In the piece “Three Blind Mice,” Campopiano, Guy Marsden and Jonathan Schull built robotic devices operated by mice. The artists are attempting to teach the mice how to control the vehicles through incentives of food and water.

“[In this piece], you don’t just work with live creatures, you get to think about what it means to be alive or what it would take to make something animate. We also love to play around with ideas of sentience and what actually makes the human consciousness.”

While some who frequented the event may have been intrigued by the philosophic pursuits of artists

“It isn’t ... art with a capital A.”

—William Tremblay

like Campopiano, most appeared to have a good time just fiddling with electronic devices or watching robots create artistic works on their own. For Repetto, the most important aspect of his show is that he can engage people with technology in ways they never thought were possible.

“I love seeing kids come here and play with these things,” he said. “They think, ‘Hey, I could go home and make art.’ And that’s fantastic.”