

GALLERIES

Taming technology's overload with artful systems

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent, 5/2/2003

The Cyberarts Festival is midway through its two-week run in sites all over the city, where artists and viewers alike are trying to tame technology into art with lasting content. It's not an easy task: When new technology arises, the tendency is to get caught up in the magic of the medium. Producing substantive art may not come until years later.

Although it has an unfortunate title, "info@blah," the show at the Mills Gallery at the Boston Center for the Arts, stands out because it wrestles with a serious question posed by the Information Age: What do we do with all this knowledge at our fingertips? Taking overload as a starting point, the curating group iKatun has assembled artists who make sense of, break open, and critique the plight of the over-informed. They don't just wallow in the overload: They use it as the material for their art.

Many of them invent systems to contain their material. In "Datamining the Amazon," Angie Waller graphs out literary tastes of acquaintances, mimicking the niche marketing of Amazon.com, only to discover that nobody perfectly fits into any niche. In "Working Notes," Natalie Loveless interviewed people who stopped by the gallery, then mapped out their stories in an intricate grid on the wall, with push pins (or straight pins, or needles) fastening items connected to each story into the plaster.

Other artists attempt to subvert systems. Rachel Perry Welty's "Everything in the Beginning" takes medical records and paints over them, a single dot obscuring almost every letter or character, appropriating a record of struggle into something beautiful. Rachel Beth Egenhoefer's "Revealed Messages" records a table full of chocolates, set in a grid on digital video, transforming it into binary information that the viewer can alter by eating a chocolate.

Others appropriate and re-envision systems. The group Stanza's Internet piece, www.thecentralcity.co.uk, takes information from maps and images of London and breaks it down to unexpected slivers, then builds it up into something startling and unrecognizable. Joseph Smolinski's "Potato Cells" is delightfully earthy, making a light show out of a combination of fiber optic cables and the more archaic method of plugging battery electrodes into spuds.

Artists and scientists are usually the first to make sense of the unknown. "Info@blah" suggests that despite -- or maybe because of -- all our knowledge, we're in a sea of unknowing, but there are pioneers out there trying to map it for us.

Curator Dana Moser has put together a robotics show, "The Ballad of Wires and Hands," at the New Art Center, which has its opening tonight, and it's got plenty of metaphorical (and some actual) bells and whistles. It's fun, but is it more than magic?

Sometimes. A handful of the pieces are hauntingly beautiful, like Dan Roe's "Sisyphus Dreams" series, in which he explores the struggle of the man destined by the Greek gods to spend his life pushing a stone up a hill, only to watch it roll down again. Roe turns Sisyphus into an electronic moth, in one piece battling hopelessly against the inside of a glass dome. In another, tied by the tail to a rock. Steve Hollinger makes exquisite, solar-powered models of nature. Touch a pedal, turn on a light, and "Jellyfish" delicately wafts in a vessel filled with water.

Arthur Ganson and Chris Fitch are longtime makers of kinetic sculptures. Ganson's "Radio Press" is a hoot: Gears turning incrementally during the course of the show tighten a vise on an old transistor radio, slowly crushing it. Fitch's "Bubbles" makes metal washers into glimmering spheres, riding up and down vibrating belts. Deb Todd Wheeler's "La La la-la-la" invites you to duck your head inside a mesh dome. The motion sets off flitting lights like fireflies chirping sounds. It's enchanting, but it would be even more so with a sky full of lights.

In other pieces, the technology trips up the message -- even when the message is about technology, like David Webber's motion detector that merely sets off all sorts of turntables and monitors, or Jane D. Marsching's projection piece, showing a seashore scene revolving around a tiny dark room. The image is small and cryptic, and the viewer has to chase it to begin to make sense of it, and gets dizzy in the process.

"The Ballad of Wires and Hands" is in the end a fun show, full of interactive pieces. A child visiting the

gallery when I was there named her favorite piece, which turned out to be the most low-tech work in the show: a hand-cranked sculpture by Fitch. The artists may have something to learn from her.

Idea overload "Invisible Ideas," one of the Boston Cyberarts Festival's public art pieces, deserves kudos for high aspirations, but once again the equipment gets in the way of the content. This piece, devised by the Nature and Inquiry Artists Group, puts a small computer tuned into a GPS satellite into the hands of anyone who wants to wander from the Copley Society, where you can get the equipment, down the Commonwealth Mall and into the Public Garden and the Common.

Through that area, at 147 points, ideas flash on the computer screen and speak into your headphones. Art, physics, metaphysics, and ideas about community are discussed. Stories are told. Sometimes they connect to your geography, sometimes they don't. It's like taking a walk with a revered teacher: rigorous, challenging, occasionally enlightening, often pedantic. I felt I couldn't enjoy the beautiful spring day, as I was having an intellectual dialogue with a computer. The intent was to connect me with my environment; instead, it cut me off from it.