Electric eye

Mixed signals emanate from the art world's technological brain waves—but are they art?

By Glen Helfand

After a performance of Twisted Pairs, George Coates Performance Works' latest piece of high-tech theater, the show's visual coordinator offers to take a few people upstairs to look at the equipment. We pass by computer kiosks in the lobby linked to the show's Web site as he leads us up funky back stairs to the projection and lighting booth. It's filled with banks of whirring slide projectors and computers that emit a soft light and lend the space a twinkling control-room feel. In this cozy environment we're told that Coates's working method is akin to that of a filmmaker and that the show's trippy projections required pricey Silicon Graphics computers to "extrapolate a stereo image on a 3-D model." Whatever that means.

The *sho,* our guide tells us, is a complexly cued theatrical experience about Internet life that audiences have enjoyed but critics have generally abhorred. "It's a serious work of art, and it's also like a ride at Great America," he says. "But people try to review it as if it were a Shakespeare play."

Our escort's paradoxical appraisal raises a sticky question, one that resonates throughout the hyperbole-ridden realm of electronically and digitally based artwork: How are viewers supposed to approach the intricate collections of sampled sound, digital images, and moving machine parts that make up new techno-art? Ride it?

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The Mix

1. Pattie Smith posters after the Warfield show, Mon/18
2. The Mo’Fessionalists, Great American Music Hall’s Disc Makers showcase, Thurs/21
3. Bone, Faye Myenne Ng
4. Yoko Ono, Great American Music Hall, Mon/18
5. The “Los Hombres Lloran” Tabasco sauce billboard on Valencia near 22nd St.

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The problem is—in the terms most critics and viewers use to talk about "art"—it’s difficult to tell where the ride ends and the art begins, and where, exactly, old forms of viewing and criticism are no longer relevant and new ones need to be formulated. Like photography, which took nearly a century after its invention to win artistic credibility, video installations—like CD-ROMs, Internet-based art, and digitally based sound works still struggle to be taken seriously.

Though increasing use of the Internet and cellular phones have already subverted our notions of space and time, viewers faced with aesthetic challenges at museum exhibitions may still find themselves asking that tired question, "Is it art?"

In the Bay Area, at least, there’s plenty of it. From the San Jose Museum of Art to the fourth floor of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, stages, galleries, and art schools are blinking and buzzing with projects—like Coates’ live-wired theater piece, museum shows by media-art pioneers Nam June Paik and Steina and Woody Vasulka, and the tech-art harvests of Multimedia Gulch. But even in the greater Silicon Valley, where we have a more abundant view of the field than does just about any other city, the results of this new cultural crop are mixed. Too often the aesthetic products of personal computers seem like cold, gimmicky works that are only as good as the expensive toys that made them happen.

It’s no surprise that, faced with the mass-media-generated, cybergenic "Wow" that greets all manners of digital art, semiotics don’t have the vocabulary to deal with digital art. There’s nothing for them to compare it to. But who actually sets the standards for distinguishing between arcade game and sculpture? When Center for the Arts featured a virtual reality piece in 1994, for example, the audience—confused or not—decided for itself: the lines outside were as perceptual as the glitches. The meaning of such work, however, is often anyone’s guess. You’ll wonder how it works before you question what it means. That is, if you even know enough about the artist’s intention to be able to tell if it’s working.

The lack of information in this segment of the Information Age may trace back to the deep gaps in understanding between the field of art and the field of technology. Many artists, not to mention dealers and collectors, are repelled or intimidated by the prohibitive costs and complexity of some technological tools. And art history is hard to keep track of in the ever-changing world of high tech, a place where the latest version is always the best. Keeping up is time-consuming business—discussions of aesthetic issues can get left in the dust.

Aside from the institutional biases new media always face when trying to get respect, high-tech artworks also face marginalization because of such specificity. They may enjoy quick popular interest, but such works are usually herded into their own lonely pen.

"The electronic shows in general are ghettoized," Campbell says. "There is little curating that is interesting in this field. It’s rare if the shows are organized thematically in any real way other than around technology."

Industrial-art revolution

The tech ghetto’s border guards are not working overtime in San Francisco, however. Bob Riley, media arts curator at SFMOMA, has organized shows that provide some much needed background and begin to link electronic media to more traditional forms. The inclusion of time-based elements like video, or interactive machinery, for example, add dimensions to the usual experience of "art. We have empathy for sculpture because it inhabits space the same way that we do," he explains. "Painting supplies us with a perspective, a paint-and-ground relationship that becomes something experiential."

He goes on to suggest new viewing approaches to innovative media. "People have to understand [that with new media arts] they engage several sense perceptions simultaneously. And that entails different senses of time and flow and punctuation. They need to know that somehow they are in conversation directly with thought processes and the way that images work, the way image and object work together."

Riley’s current project is "Machine Media," an exhibition of...
video installations by Steina and Woody Vasulka. The show fills the high-tech galleries on SFMOMA’s fourth floor (through Sun/31) with complicated installations made of banks of video monitors and automated machinery. The Sante Fe-based Vasulkas—a married couple who have been working in electronic media since the late 1960s—have created some strangely beautiful pieces over the past 25 years. Displayed in darkened galleries, their videotapes feature surrealistic Video Toaster-like effects and are accompanied by the expected electronic sound tracks. Their pieces are trippy theatrical and interactive spaces.

But viewers entering these installations may not be completely willing to take any trips. While I was looking at Woody Vasulka’s Theater of Hybrid Automata, a cube structure with target boards, a roving camera, and live projections, a woman asked me what was going on. “I think it’s a surveillance system that’s actually taking pictures of us,” I tried to explain with my limited knowledge of the piece.

Then she turned to her companions. “It’s all done with computers,” she told them in a smoky voice.

Like much cryptic contemporary art, Automata isn’t easy to understand, but the computerized aspect is comprehensible for the whole family—a fact that puts this piece of art on the same level as the AIM.

Perhaps that’s because the Vasulkas’ working methods relate to engineering as much as artmaking. They initially collaborated with technicians to develop circuitry-based effects, but later created their own tools and interfaces.

“The Vasulkas established a method of working that found electronic media not a fully formed utility, but one subject to interpretation,” Riley writes in the show’s catalog. He goes on to suggest that they’ve chosen technology itself as their material and mined it to make challenging metaphors of their machines.

But while “Machine Media” confidently positions the Vasulkas as serious artists, the show still calls up stereotypical elements of a tech genre forged in earlier times. These days the Vasulkas may seem less like innovators than wise godparents to a younger generation of media artists. Their pieces reaffirm timeless notions about gender and technology: in works like the mesmerizing Borealis, a video-projected water world on free-hanging screens, Steina Vasulka deals with the proverbially female turf of Nature. Woody Vasulka’s angular laboratory installations, composed of reclaimed, reprogrammed military-surveillance equipment, video cameras, and synthesized voices, comments obliquely on the horrors of the mostly male terrain of War. By both constructing and deconstructing machines, the Vasulkas recontextualize them.

Lost in ‘Cybertown’
Sixty-three-year-old Nam June Paik, a Korean-born, New York- and Ohio-based techno-artist visionary of a similar generation and media-pioneer status as the Vasulkas, also uses technology as both material and subject matter—to a slightly less successful effect. His current exhibition, “Electronic Super Highway” at the San Jose Museum of Art (through May 5), offers more ride-like thrill than brain tingle.

Like many of us, Paik has been seduced by the Internet. His show is a veritable amusement park called “Cybertown” made of television-set sculptures. It’s a humanistic attempt to give chilly, inanimate Net relationships a warmer, three-dimensional presence—which he achieves with little buildings patterned after small-town America. His schoolhouse, for example, shimmers with monitors that display a quickly repeating video collage of public-service announcements and entertainment clips. It’s the kind of thing Paik’s been honing for more than 30 years. The video emulates our quickening TV treewithweeping willow wires and solar-powered laptop, suggests we “honor thy server.” Paik makes a TV tree with weeping willow wires that’s titled “More Log-in: Less Logging.” Get it?

Twisted pairs: George Coates’s newest technological extravaganza falls short when attempting to bring on-line characters to life.

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Paik’s programming innovations are striking, ultimately they don’t make this exhibit more interesting to a viewer like me. The display in Las Vegas had even more monitors—and the images were a lot splashier than a processed video version of an aging Cunningham in tight.

Coates unplugged
Both Paik and George Coates reflect another aesthetic menace that seems to rear its head most frequently when art enters the digital terrain: a high nerdiness quotient. Their technically sophisticated attempts to give Internet lifestyles a physical form veer toward puerile tendencies as they pepper their pieces with adolescent Netspeak puns. One news-reporting Coates character mentions a late-breaking version of Communism called Chairman Mao 2.0, while the heroine, an Amish girl who finds a solar-powered laptop, suggests we “honor thy server.” Paik makes a TV tree with weeping willow wires that’s titled “More Log-in: Less Logging.” Get it?

What makes such simplistic strategies so appealing? Both artists seem to buy into the televised notion that simply calling up the subject of technology will automatically result in provocative work—and both have been rewarded with substantial media coverage. The shallow critique of technology’s effect on society may also betray these artists’ sometimes secondhand con-
ambivalent relationship to the digital.

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nections to the technology they celebrate. Like many others, Paik and Coates rely — to varying degrees — on cadres of programmers to realize their creative visions. This relationship makes it even easier for the point to get swallowed by the tools.

Though the democratic beauty of the Net is that no one is really an expert, Coates, too, is clueless about where technology is taking us. His show deals with the dislocation of Net-surfing interaction by creating live-action entertainment that relies heavily on computerized gadgetry — and is itself dislocating. The playbill even includes a glossary of tech terms. And although his very 1990s conceit, sponsored by the Sausalito-based on-line service the Well, promises to explore the cultural vanguard with the help of high-end computer systems, it just looks and feels like a gimmicky mishmash of untested, though electronically processed, material.

In a review of the show, the Chronicle’s Laura Evenson wrote: “Twisted Pairs skims so superficially over so many ideas that it ends up being as devoid of meaty content as the on-line world it parodies.” Perhaps that’s the idea, but it comes at the fatal expense of narrative and cultural commentary. Like many of us, maybe Coates just can’t comprehend the big picture.

Better than binary

That “big picture” is also lost on experts of all kinds. And the problem may be that most kinds of new technology are developed to solve consumer and industrial problems rather than artistic ones.

“Silicon Valley people don’t understand aesthetic issues,” says Loretta Staples, an interface designer and board member of a tech project, a San Francisco gallery, “They have different vested interests [than do artists] and different takes on the meaning of technology. They are enthusiasts with little critical capacity. Artists are more sensitive, perhaps because it’s more difficult for them to survive financially. If you’re a tech person, it’s easy to be rich, cutting-edge, and media-saturated. It’s a lifestyle that doesn’t exactly promote self-reflection.”

Staples also argues that the relationship between the creation and the use of technological tools is equally problematic. “Computer scientists and desktop publishers are two cultures that don’t understand each other,” she says. “Scientists work to replicate, rebuild, and remodel aspects of nature via computer. This gets schlockified when it moves into the entertainment realm. It obscures the scientific achievement, and the substance of the endeavor gets lost in the translation.”

Take a look at any CD-ROM game with cheesy computer-graphic landscapes and you’ll know exactly what she means. It’s visuals like these that nudge artists to re-think their relationship to the techno-art world.

“Since there’s so much hype around the word cyber, I’m hesitant to link myself to computers,” says San Francisco-based artist Rebecca Bollinger, another recipient of the SECA Award in Electronic Media (winners will be featured in an SFMOMA exhibit this fall). “There’s a view of working with a computer tool as something expansive. The more excessive the image — the more techno it can be — the better. It can work the opposite way. But the same critique could be applied to painting.”

In her intriguing videotape Alphabetically Sorted, Bollinger explores the coded language of the Internet. She feeds its linguistic by-products — the gender-signifying “keywords” that lead one through CompuServe — through sorting and voice-simulating programs. With such works, the artist articulates an ambivalent relationship to the digital.

“Since I’ve been involved with the computer, I’ve related to it with equal parts horror and seduction. Through my work I’m trying to figure out [technology] like everyone else is. These sources are so invisible that [it] makes them more powerful than other media we’re used to.” Bollinger also sees the computer as a flexible tool. “I’ve heard a lot of people say that work made in the digital arena has to be displayed on the computer. I completely disagree with that.”

Bollinger is a member of a generation of artists who are applying more conceptual strategies to the investigation of digital space, an arena some feel has barely been exploited. It’s not difficult to see why: the root of digital technology is essentially invisible. Programmed code would seem to be inherently unesthetic terrain. Obviously, some artists don’t see it that way.

“A computer represents by encoding real-world occurrences. That’s the point, not the image itself,” says Elliot Anderson, a Bay Area artist, curator, and software engineer. “The image is shaped through different contact with the world. It’s more experiential and cognitive, rather than just visual.”

Anderson, who is part of the Technè, an S.F.-based art and technology collective that presents and packages its own shows, pushes the virtual envelope with what he calls “cognitive sculpture.” These pieces explore spatial qualities and the inherent “pathology” of the computer. With experience in building flight simulators, Anderson approaches his work scientifically, experimenting with the seemingly backward idea of the viewer being manipulated by a computer-controlled environment, rather than the other way around.

In The Temptation of Saint Anthony (Lust and Death), which showed in a January exhibition at the new San Francisco Art Commission Gallery, a projected image of a naked man enacts various states of obsessive-compulsive behavior — except these actions are being dictated by the viewer as she or he moves through the gallery. With his elaborate if visually austere use of sensors and computer programming, Anderson humanizes the digital by making it reflect our fears, presence, and pathologies. Not that everyone in the audience necessarily picks up on those points.

“I once did a piece about aphrodisia, but people didn’t quite know what was happening,” he says. “When I asked them what they thought, the first thing people said was that it was beautiful. They then asked, ‘How does it work?’”

* Electronic Super Highway: Nam June Paik in the ’90s. Through May 5. Tues.-Sun., 10 a.m.-5 p.m. (Thurs., 10 a.m.-9 p.m.), San Jose Museum of Art, 110 South Market, San Jose. $6. (408) 294-2797.

* Machine Media. Through March 31. Tues.-Sat., 11 a.m.-6 p.m. (Thurs., 11 a.m.-9 p.m.), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. $3.50-$7. (415) 357-4000.