

SWITCH

Volume 18
Number 1 *Interface: Software as Cultural
Production*

Article 7

3-10-2003

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Recommended Citation

Hager, Jenny (2003) "Low Tech/High Concept: Global Events Shift Ideas about Technology and Art," *SWITCH*: Vol. 18 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch/vol18/iss1/7>

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Low Tech/High Concept

Global Events Shift Ideas about Technology and Art

Jenny Hager on Mar 10 2003

issue 18

Low-tech/High Concept outlines a current shift in ideas related to technology and art. This shift is attributed to recent world events and the cultural response to those events.

In a time of war, our president's recommendation is ridiculously low-tech, calling for duct tape and plastic sheeting. This seems a rather absurd response to the advent of war, but in times of crisis, it appears that low-tech is reliable and trustworthy. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education's immediate response to the events of September 11 was to work with telecommunications experts to evaluate which current methods of communication would be affected in various crisis circumstances and then develop back-up systems that would include low-tech communications strategies and non-traditional approaches.

The events of September 11 have been deemed a highly efficient use of, "Low Tech/High Concept." The terrorists hi-jacked commercial airplanes using box-cutters and proceeded to fly the planes into American cultural symbols of power. These attacks weren't about access to high technology or warfare; these attacks were made by men who had an immense amount of determination and some kind of axe to grind. Professor Mary Kalantzis of RMIT University said, "Evil, terrorists, oppressors, martyrs, men of God--it was about meaning and humanity, not the genius or might and science of technology and the market which so dominates the thinking of advanced democracies."

Currently, the events of September 11, along with the dot com bubble and the downturn in the economy has caused an apparent shift in the winds that dictate technology as it relates to the world. This current societal trend is a natural response to the circumstances of which we live. It is no wonder that a concurrent shift is taking place in the art world, a re-visiting of low-tech/high concept ideals, in place of the former "technotopia".

Co-founder of MIT's Wearable Computing Project **Steve Mann** has written an article about the response to terror. Mann's article "**Post Cyborg Path to Deconism**" from **CTheory** is a haunting look at America post 911. Mann begins the article with an explanation of cultural ideas in a time of threat and terror. He says, "The cyborg-age of yesterday is connected with ideas of postmodernism, deconstructionism and posthumanism (itself, somewhat related to the ideas of cyborgism). But these ideas, along with culture jamming, as well as my own sur/sousveillance situationist street theatre, have become ineffective in the contemporary age of Terror." He continues, warning against government high tech methods of "protecting" its citizens and postulates that there may be more "television cameras than television receivers."

This post-911 belief that low-tech solutions will counterattack terror is fueled by the belief that low technology is simple to control. Pre-911, this wasn't the mass cultural belief; in fact, high tech defense and security strategies were our focus. Strangely, the reality is that criminals, hackers, and terrorists all use low-tech strategies to breach

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security. Utilizing social engineering, dumpster diving and tailgating tactics, criminals, hackers and terrorists can gain access to privileged information, equipment and "secure" areas. What we discovered from 911 is that no amount of technology can protect us. And that in order to feel more secure, we also need to consider alternative methods of communication, physical security (the elimination of non-passengers inside airport terminals, for example), and using common sense. Here's a low-tech concept - we've learned to trust our judgment if something seems askew.

The point is high tech isn't always the best solution, particularly in the world of art. In **The Death of Computer Art**, Lev Manovich illustrates the two distinct worlds of the computer art world, which he calls "Turingland" and the art world, which he calls "Duchampland," drawing the conclusion that the two worlds will never converge. Manovich believes that the two worlds he describes have two distinct sets of values. One of these characteristics is the issue of content. The art world, as Manovich explains, "is oriented towards the 'content'" as the computer art world "is oriented towards new, state-of-the-art computer technology rather than 'content'." When speaking about ISEA and Ars Electronica, he says, "These gatherings do play an important function of being a buffer zone, an interface where the world of culture at large and the world of computer culture meet each other. Sometimes we even see artists genuinely pushing the boundaries of new media aesthetics, i.e. going beyond what is already accomplished by flight simulators, new computer games with their AI engines, MIT Media Lab projects, etc. In short, on occasion artists are able to compete with computer researchers, rather than simply creating new demos for commercial software, thus functioning as "memes" for computer industry."

Although Manovich recognizes the significant contributions of both worlds he describes, he concludes that ultimately the two worlds will not become one.

A year and a half after September 11, a society that once was driven by the same ideal as the computer art world, "new, state-of-the-art technology", now is shifting back towards the ideal of the art world "content." 911 shifted the values of a society once dominated by technology.

This newfound low-tech approach to culture can be seen in security, business, marketing, and in the art world, but September 11 isn't the only reason for the cultural shift from high tech to low-tech/high concept. Fertilizing the seeds of low-tech was the dot compost. When the bubble burst, so did our aspirations of a techno-savior. From a purely financial standpoint, the corporate backing for emerging technologies and technological research fell through, especially projects involving artists. Part of the myth and magic was gone. And how about the "culture jamming" that Steve Mann refers to? Isn't he correct in saying that it has become quite difficult to differentiate between "culture jamming" and "culture spamming?" Pop culture is inundated with technology. With all of technology's conveniences and advances, why do we still desire simple human interaction and low-tech interfaces?

Despite the achievements of scientists and artists alike in areas such as surveillance, artificial intelligence and VR, we still must leave room for the physical experience of objects and people. CADRE invitational guest Margaret Morse said, "Lev Manovich called this [the computer] the greatest art work of the second half of the twentieth century. I don't think of it as an artwork. I think of it as a genius, but not as an artwork. To me, an artist would be actually taking us away from this and developing other potential interfaces."

Low-tech/high concept art often uses the natural world to reference the virtual world. Artist, writer and curator Beryl Graham deals with interactivity in her work, both high tech and low tech. Some of her low-tech games include "Cooties, Left Brain/Right Brain, and MASH (Mansion, Apartment, Shack House)." What is appealing about these low-tech games in particular is that they're instruments for engaging in random conversations. The games are made from a single sheet of paper and are free, interactive and accessible. They can be bi-lingual or non-language based.

Americans place a lot of value in technology, and that probably will not change. However, lately, more respect has been given to the experiential quality of engaging the physical world. When CADRE invitational guest **Peter Lunenfeld** spoke about his own project, **Media Pamphlets**, he compared the experience of reading printed material to that of riding a bicycle rather than riding a motorcycle. It's a different kind of experience, one with a different set of values and motivations. Lunenfeld referred to the experience as "non-motorized." He said, "You want an experience that you want to push yourself rather than rely on a machine to move you."

Spiritual, mental and physical health are also becoming more important as our bodies become more and more plugged into technology. People who work and make art through the use of computers suffer from neck and back pain as well as strained eyesight. Perhaps as our everyday way of life becomes more mediated, the artist's

current tendency will be to move toward the natural world. In reference to Lunenfeld's Media Pamphlets, Morse said, "Maybe in a way, what Peter Lunenfeld was doing with the books reminds me of my own mood lately. My own mood is that I am drawn away from things that are completely related to media and computers and the things that somehow invoke that with material objects, and remind me that entire world is mediated and I don't have to look at the computer, move cursors, use my mouse, and all that sort of things in order to actually be dealing with a world that is completely mediated."

Pre-911, in conjunction to her exhibition at DeCordova Museum, "Make Your Move: Interactive Computer Art", new media artist Jennifer Hall, who received her master's in visual studies from MIT, was ironically giving advice to Patti Hartigan of the **Boston Globe** to "plug out," saying that artists especially should "be both inside of it and outside of it," in reference to technology. Hall is troubled by the idea that as a society, we are always picking up the pace, moving faster and further, always trying to get a step ahead of nature with technology. September 11 changed this, if only but for a fleeting moment.

Technology is a part of everyday American culture. Digital technology is familiar; millions of Americans own DVD players, cell phones, personal computers, and TiVo. The news uses animated headlines and graphics to describe war and local events. There's even a virtual first down line painted on the field during televised football games. Technology is omni-present.

Mann said, "Although the rise of dot commerce, and with it, the growth of spam, certainly destroyed the distinction between culture jamming and culture spamming, Terrorism, and perhaps, more significantly, the response to terrorism, have given birth to a new impotency of inverse culture." In a society that is entirely surrounded in technology, during a time of eminent war and conflict, it is a reasonable response to retreat to a world more physical and familiar. This is not to say that innovations will not continue in the world of science, technology, or art, but it does seem that currently there is a societal regrouping in its ways of thinking.



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