A&E

Arts, Entertainment, Restaurants & Calendar

Electric eye

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

By Glen Helfand

A FTER 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?
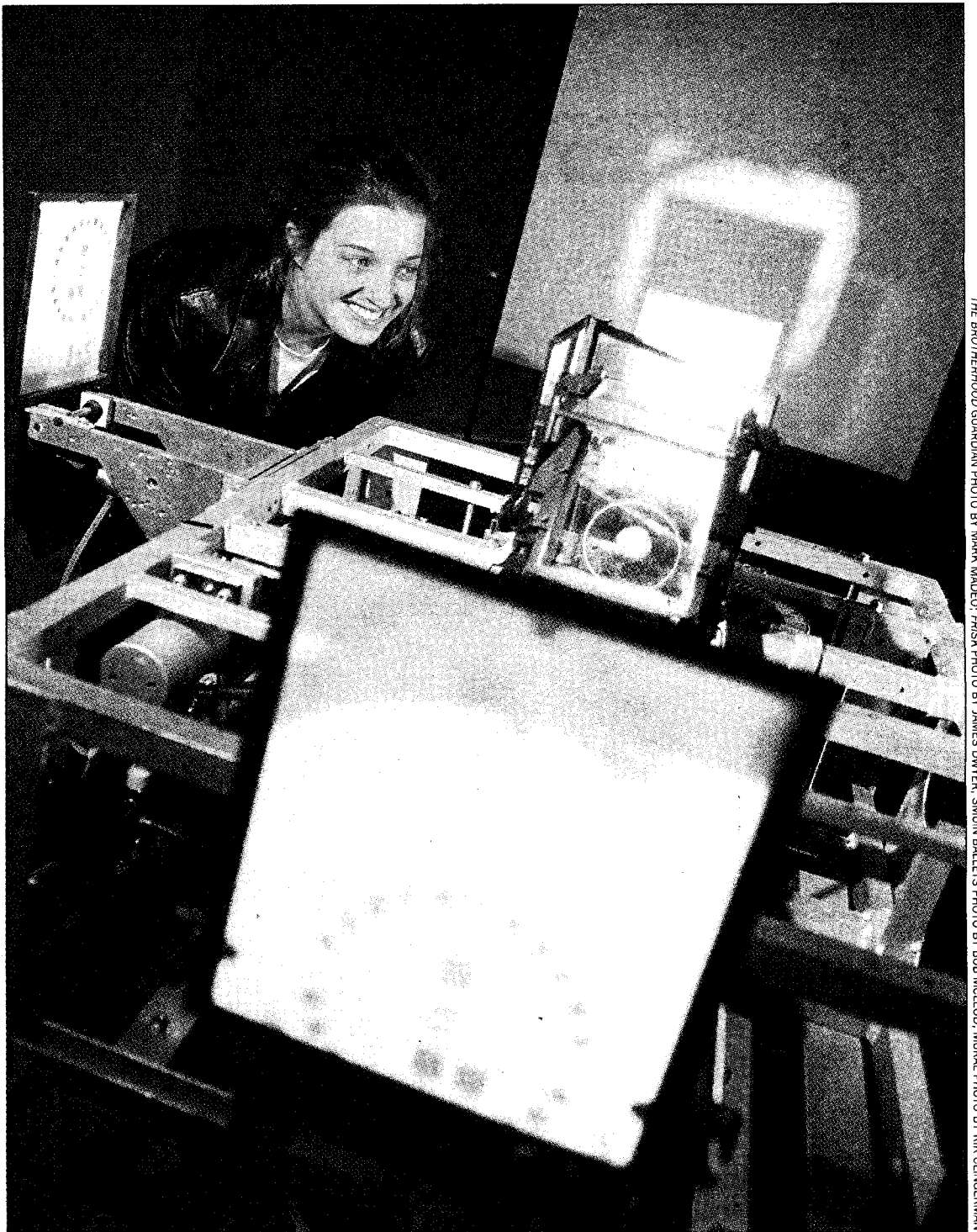
THE BROTHERHOOD GUARDIAN PHOTO BY MARK MADEO; FRISK PHOTO BY JAMES DWYER; SMUIN BALLET'S PHOTO BY BOB MCLEOD; MURAL PHOTO BY RIK CLINGERMAN

Machine-driven: *Woody Vasulka's The Brotherhood, Table 1 (1996) relates to engineering as much as artmaking.*

Frisky business
Todd Verow's Frisk matches arty confusion with ultraviolence [p.39]

Pallid ballad
There's not much to love in Smuin Ballets' new piece, Frankie and Johnny [p.46]

Wallflower
Sí, se puede *mural* feted at César Chavez school — in 8 Days a Week [p.64]

Saint Patti's Day

'THE HIGHLIGHT OF THE SHOW was pretty much from when I got there to when I left," said George Hurd of **Maitri AIDS Hospice,** summing things up for everyone who caught Patti Smith's unannounced set at Slim's last Monday night. Hurd's Castro-based organization was on the receiving end of Smith's benefit performance, to the tune of $6,000.

Smith and her band—which included onetime Television guitarist **Tom Verlaine** and original Smith band member **Lenny Kaye**—finished their show at the Warfield, packed up, and headed for 11th Street, taking the stage at close to midnight in front of a packed house. Word of the show had been embargoed until 3 p.m. that day, and then it went out by way of the Internet through Jaan Uhelszki in the on-line magazine *Addicted to Noise,* radio PSAs, and Smith herself, who announced it from the Warfield stage.

According to Jenny Maxwell of Slim's, Smith—who'd done a benefit for Maitri last year—had contacted Slim's, which gave the entire proceeds from the door to the hospice, a few weeks prior to the performance date, and "then the show came together quickly over the weekend." Smith, her band, and the entire house were as relaxed as could be (at one point, while Kaye was singing, Smith even sat down against the drum riser and stretched her legs out), and the band pumped out more than an hour's worth of material, which climaxed in a rocking rendition of "Gloria."

After the band finished its set, Smith, exhausted, left along with her 13-year-old son **Jackson** (who had led the band in a fractured cover of Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water"), while Verlaine and Kaye hung around and Maitri employees and volunteers glowed with success. The hospice, founded in 1987 and on the verge of moving from an eight-bed to a 15-bed facility, depends on donations for half its operating budget. Hurd emphasized that the hospice also depends on volunteer help. Those interested can reach Maitri at (415) 863-8508.

Solo Asylum

We don't believe that the best things necessarily come in small packages, but sometimes the best musicians do show up in small clubs. In town recently for a little writing, recording, and general tomfoolery, **Soul Asylum** heartthrob and friend-of-Winona **Dave Pirner** found time for a few impromptu gigs at Club Boomerang. After watching sets by Decal, Jojo, and Pomegranate two Fridays ago, he asked club booker Michael James if he could wrap up the evening with a solo set of new material. James of course replied with an enthusiastic thumbs up, but Pirner promptly got cold feet. James says he called James chicken; still Pirner balked. James dared him; Pirner remained shy. James triple-dared him; and with his honor at stake, Pirner succumbed.

But even under the dreaded triple-dare threat, a half-hour before showtime Pirner recruited a couple of local barflies as backup. He dubbed his newborn band Woof and borrowed Decal's gear to churn out a roaring set that included, among other classics, the Stooges' "I Wanna Be Your Dog" and the Troggs' "Wild Thing."

Pirner promised to make amends for performing with backup by returning on Boomerang's Acoustic Monday for a bona fide *solo* performance. James says he was skeptical, but when Monday arrived, so did Pirner. "I told him that I didn't expect to see him," said James, laughing. "And he said, 'Hey, we had a deal. You triple-dared me, man, so I have to do it.' He was petrified to go onstage, but then I called him a wimp, so he did."

Using a guitar he had borrowed from the band **Blew Willy,** Pirner stoically played for 30 minutes. Then he and **Preacher Boy** (who also performed a solo set) jammed together on standards by **Woody Guthrie, Willy Dixon,** and **Muddy Waters**. "They asked me to play harmonica with them," James boasted, "but I said they were too ugly to play with." In addition to classic tunes, the crowd was treated to Pirner's Preacher Boy impersonations and a barrage of traded insults between the two musicians. "Pirner called Preacher a lame-ass white blues dude; Preacher talked about Pirner's sappy folk songs. It was hilarious, just a free-for-all hootenanny jam. I kept requesting 'Freebird,' but they wouldn't play it."

Pirner reportedly blew town the next day for New Orleans, where he was going to record a track for an upcoming **Big Star** tribute album. Solo, perhaps?

The Mix

1. Patti Smith posters after the Warfield show, Mon/18
2. The Mo'Fessionals, 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 Llorran" Tabasco sauce billboard on Valencia near 22nd St. ☞

ARTS & E

Electric eye

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, 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 exhibits 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's 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, cyber-gasmic "Wow" that greets all manner of lame CD-ROM titles and techno-art messes, some viewers harbor deep-rooted resistance to electronic and digital art. But, like the swelling superhighway itself, technologically derived art must be reckoned with. If we could find a coherent way to talk about it — or even describe it — we might even learn to like it.

Critical bottleneck

"The first time I saw virtual reality as an art piece, there was no way to analyze it," says Bay Area artist Jim Campbell, whose work shows at the Rena Bransten Gallery. "I was overwhelmed by the experience." Campbell holds a degree from MIT in electronic engineering, a field in which he works part time. He's also one of a growing breed of artists who combine scientific skills with artistic interests. His interactive sculptures, which use film and video and have been exhibited internationally, electronically recreate the effects of entropy and decay.

If Campbell, a recipient of SFMOMA's first annual Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art (SECA) Award in Electronic Media, was overwhelmed, imagine the layperson's first encounter with an equally innovative form of high-tech art.

"There are not a lot of historical references to analyze the work by," Campbell admits. "In general, crit-

---

The shallow critique of technology's effect on society may also betray these artists' sometimes second-hand connections to the technology they celebrate.

---

ics 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 perpetual 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 aesthetics 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 pens.

"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 perceptors 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 ethereal 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 ATM.

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 timeworn notions about gender and technology: in works like the mesmerizing *Borealis*, a video-project-
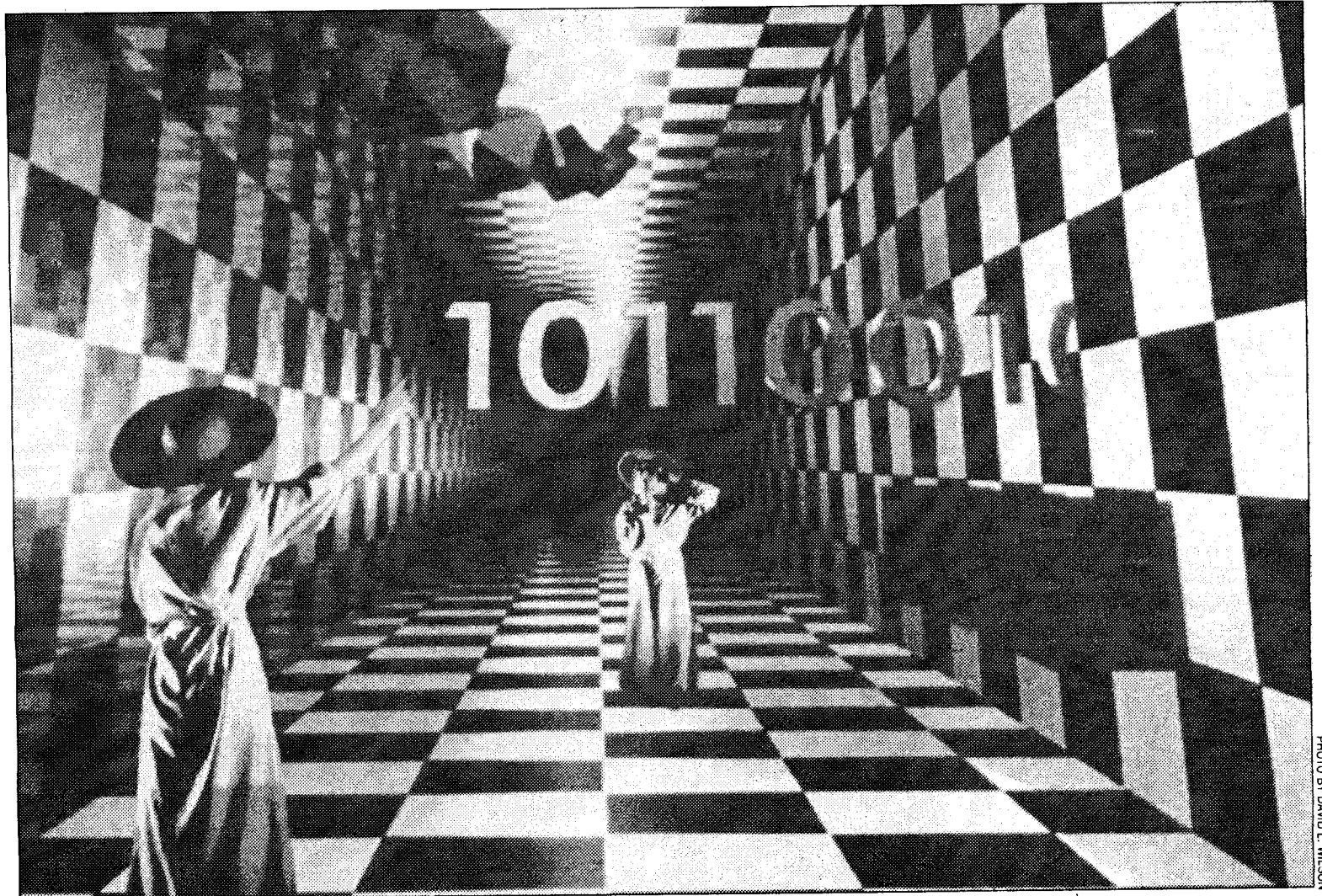

Twisted pairs: *George Coates's newest technological extravaganza falls short when attempting to bring on-line characters to life.*

PHOTO BY DAVID L. WILSON

ed 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 ridelike 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 edutainment clips. It's the kind of thing Paik's been honing for more than 30 years. The video emulates our quickening channel-surfing sensibility, a strategy that fails to recognize the obvious differences between rapid television viewing and slow-going Web browsing. The Web — at speeds I can afford at least — is a sleep-inducing process.

As I sit on the bench in front of Paik's electronic town billboard and watch the rapid video configurations of morphing presidents, Merce Cunningham dancers, rock stars, and burning folk art, my eyes begin to glaze.

"He's brilliant," a friend says to me, sharpening my focus. I don't quite know what he means but I nod in agreement. He explains the programming of the complex feeds used to make the video jump from pictures in single monitors to larger images that span several screens. It's a sight I've seen in the windows of electronics stores and, to more elaborate effect, in a Las Vegas hotel lobby. I've never once stopped to think about how it was done. Hearing about Paik's technological savvy per se doesn't do much for me. I find my lack of interest in the details surprising.

Even if 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 tights.

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-
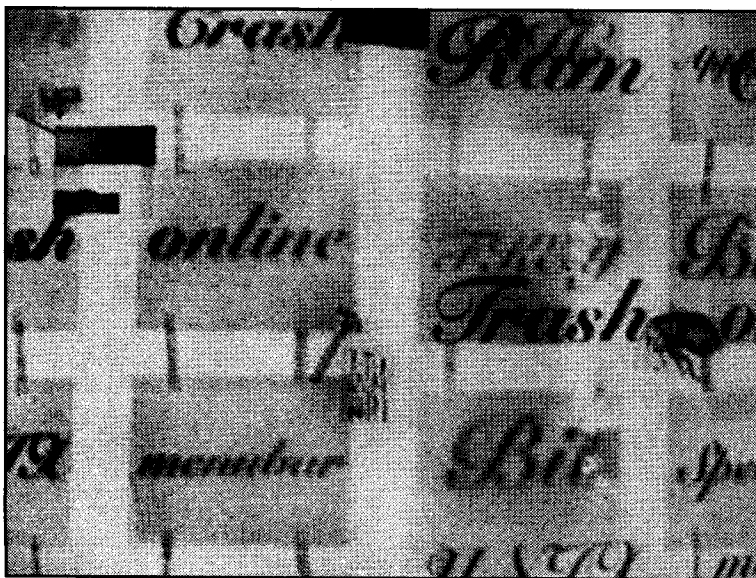
Fragments: *Rebeca Bollinger's Technobabble (1991) articulates an ambivalent relationship to the digital.*

EYE *from page 35*

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 gigantic mishmash of undigested, 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 about 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 Capp Street 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 rethink 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 Rebeca 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 an inherently unaesthetic 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 Techné, 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.
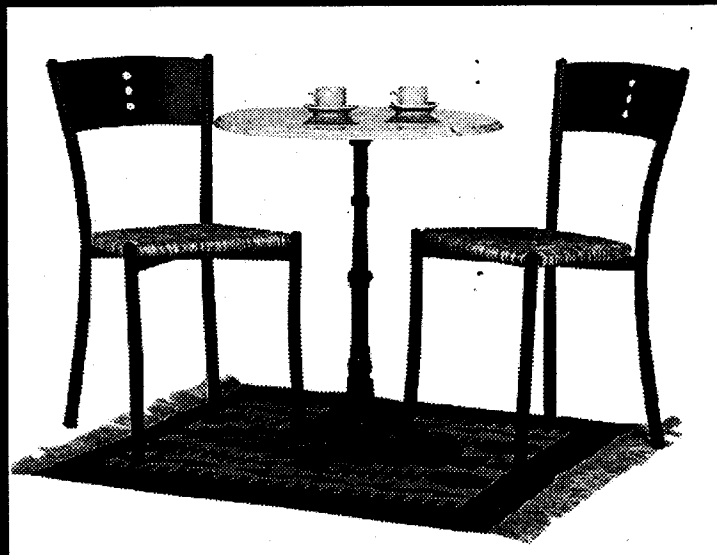
"I once did a piece about agoraphobia, but people didn't quite know what was happening," he says. "When I asked them what they thought, the first thing people said was that it was beautiful. Then they asked: 'How does it work?' " ✑

'Electronic Super Highway: Nam June Paik in the '90s.' *Through May 5. Tues.–Sun., 10 a.m.–5 p.m. (Thurs., 10 a.m.–8 p.m.), San Jose Museum of Art, 110 South Market, San Jose. $6. (408) 294-2787.*
'Machine Media.' *Through March 31. Tues.–Sun., 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.*
'Twisted Pairs.' *Through March 30. Fri.–Sat., 8 p.m., George Coates Performance Works, 110 McAllister, S.F. $24–$34. (415) 863-4130.*