

**An Interview with Diana Burgoyne about Digital Bodies and Cybernetic Spaces — conducted by Jeremy Turner via email in December, 2003.**

Jeremy Turner: According to your CV, you have been practicing cybernetic art since 1982. Your groundbreaking piece *Digital Body* was performed at Open Space just a year later. Did you develop your first ideas and inspiration about cybernetics and digital media while living in Victoria? There have been many digitally based firsts in Victoria and Vancouver — whether it be William Gibson (cyberspace fiction), Philip K. Dick (who wrote *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* while visiting Vancouver), Barry Truax (digitally granulated audio), David Rosenboom (brainwave music) or Bill Bartlett (telematic slow-scan art), to name just a few. Is there something about Victoria in particular that makes it conducive for artists to work as pioneers in digital media? Is there something unique about Victoria that the rest of the world needs to be made aware of?

Diana Burgoyne: I think it could be a chicken and egg scenario. The people who were working in Victoria at the time influenced students like myself to work with new media. I know I was influenced by people like Doug Collins and Steven Parker, who were music graduate students. They were working on a piece for Open Space that used simple sensors. Doug encouraged and helped me to get started with electronics as an artistic material.

When working with technology, I have found it important to construct humanizing strategies in materials that are traditionally seen as sanitary. This strategy of manipulating technology to create work with a humanistic aesthetic arose from a talk by the late Martin Bartlett at the University of Victoria in 1980. Bartlett defined folk art as having grown out of a non-academic, community-based tradition. The creator, usually without training, produces work from local, readily available materials. Bartlett made the argument that a \$10.00 Casio keyboard is the folk instrument of our technological society. His argument was based on accessibility of the keyboard and the lack of virtuosity needed to interact with or play the instrument.

In 2000, Laura Marks, speaking in Montreal, used the same definition to illustrate how the ASCII artists were contemporary folk artists. She pointed out a collective in England, [www.lowtec.org](http://www.lowtec.org), that received cast-off computers from companies and distributed them in the arts community, thereby making computers a readily available material.

The material, content and aesthetic of my art practice has been developed out of the idea of “Folk Art in the Digital Age.” *The body (w)hole* is the latest example of my use of electronic folk art . I have created a camera using photocells and a monitor using LED. The photocell/camera has been mounted on the front of a mask while the LED/monitor has been placed on the back. This mask allows the

illusion of light passing through my head. The material is assembled, not on circuit board, but free hand, allowing the colours, shapes and lines of the electronic components to dictate aesthetics of the piece. Assembling the material this way manipulates the technology to create a work that looks “handmade,” in hopes of humanizing this sanitary material. This work meets the criteria for folk art using materials and information available at RadioShack at a cost of about \$20.00. With only a little soldering experience, the piece could be created by anyone.

JT: Were the two *Digital Body* performances site-specific to Victoria and Open Space?

DB: *Digital Body I* was the piece I performed for the graduate show at UVic, and it received a Helen Pitt Award. *Digital Body II* was done in my final year at UVic as well. However, performing in a public space changed the work, and it was done as a result of the invitation at Open Space.

JT: From watching your performances, your strolling movements seem very robotic and controlled. Is this a conscious decision to appear robotic when walking with the gear, or is it only to coordinate the various trigger mechanisms on your body?

DB: When performing *D.B. I*, the gear did control my movement. It was the tension created by the relationship of the technology and my body that informed the work.

JT: What was on your mind when people were interacting with your performances for *Digital Body*? Was it the reaction you expected?

DB: The reaction was not what I expected. Once *D.B. I & II* were performed outside of an artistic venue, the public did not have the ability to view the pieces as art. They interpreted my performances and the technology as being the result of a medical condition or thought that I was a lunatic. These performances taught me early in my performance career about the effect of context on my work. (In the video of *D.B. II*, could you see the guy grab me and try to push me across the street? He was a lunatic but I think he thought I was one too.)

JT: In your opinion, is it a good thing for an artist to mix mediums as a form of personal expression or is it better for an artist to specialize in one medium?

DB: Yes, Mediums can always be mixed; it allows one to inform the other.

JT: What kind of future do you envision for cybernetic-based artwork?

DB: The body's relationship to technology is evolving. Artists often create work as they observe changes in the world. I assume that artists will continue to reflect on these changes by creating cybernetic artworks.

JT: Do you see your art practice as intentionally part of a "post-human" or "trans-human" project, where humanity may evolve into an improved and extropic life form?

DB: No, I see my work as raising questions on man's relationship to technology.

JT: Where and how do you situate your individual work in relation to a similar cybernetic artist such as Stelarc?

DB: After reading a catalogue of Stelarc's work called *Obsolete Body*, I would place him in the "trans-human" category. Even though I place technology on my body, I don't think it reflects "post-human" or "trans-human" ideals. The questions I wish to raise about man's relationship to technology are intended to create dialogue.

JT: What do you see as the future for cybernetic art? Will there be a day when the magic and novelty surrounding its existence wears off and is taken for granted?

JT: Are you doing any work with biotech or nanotech? If not, do you plan to as the technology becomes available?

DB: No, I do not think so. It is not the direction my work is taking me for now.

*Jeremy Owen Turner was the Digital Archivist working on contract at Open Space at the time of the interview. He is known for performance art in virtual worlds such as co-founding Second Front in Second Life. He has since received his MA in Interactive Arts at Simon Fraser University and has studied music composition with John Celona, Chris Butterfield and John Cole at UVic (1992–1997). He is also an interdisciplinary artist, writer, composer and curator. He is a co-founder of the 536 Media Collective in Vancouver. In addition, he is a co-producer of the very first Machinima Documentary, AVATARA. To date, he has conducted interviews and written articles about innovations in new media for the following: C-Theory, Shift, Intelligent Agent, Extropy, Rhizome, Offbeat and Front Magazine.*

*Email: [jerturner536@yahoo.ca](mailto:jerturner536@yahoo.ca)*