

Reflecting on Technology: Diana Burgoyne's 'Electronic Folk Art'

Diana Burgoyne's art practice creates a bridge—sometimes conceptual, sometimes physical—between human and technology. Her work takes on hybrid forms which combine sculpture and sound, performance and interaction, technology and “folk art”. For more than twenty-five years, Burgoyne's explorations of the impact of modern technology on our lives, communication, interaction and creativity have pushed the boundaries of art, art-making and our experience of art.

Burgoyne's relationship with Open Space is also more than twenty-five years old. In 1983, she was invited by John Celona to perform *Digital Body I* and *II* at Open Space for the 3rd Annual Live Computer Music Concert which was part of the *Music By Computers Series*, including performance, discussion, experimentation and collaboration. By this time, Burgoyne had performed at UCLA and at the Helen Pitt Award Show in Vancouver where she won top honors in that year's art competition.¹

By attaching homemade digital electronics controlled by mercury switches to her limbs, head and torso, Burgoyne used her body to create sounds. The slightest movement changed the result—the sonic texture and density. Silence was difficult to achieve: as Burgoyne explained it, “in order to stop the sounds, I must contort my limbs and posture so that all the switches line up in one precise configuration with the floor.”² In all, Burgoyne's performance was a unique blend of body and technology: “slinking across the floor”,³ Burgoyne took on the role of composer/ performer, her movements were precise and angular, “sounding like a virtuosic mosquito.”⁴

As part of the *Music by Computers* series, Burgoyne's performances were placed in an artistic context which explored the way electronic composers manipulated electronic ‘instruments’ (computers) to create music. The novelty of un-moving, un-breathing, un-thinking technological devices capable of creating

music appeared not just strange but funny to the 1980s audience.⁵ Burgoyne's performance and awkward physical movements complicated the idea of "music by computers" which viewers tended to equate with soulless machines. Instead, Burgoyne offered a human presence—the human behind, or perhaps, 'within' the machine.

Burgoyne returned to Open Space four months after her performance. But this work took her to the streets of downtown Victoria in conjunction with the *Locations/ National* exhibition. The project involved artist-run centres from across Canada including Mercer Union (Toronto), Eye Level (Halifax), Articule and Optica (Montreal) and Open Space in Victoria. *Locations/ National* was conceived as a way to engage the communities on local and national levels in public art—to take art outside the galleries and 'see what happens'.

Burgoyne enacted *Digital Body* on Friday, August 23, 1983, between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. in various locations in downtown Victoria. Again, sound-producing synthesizer chips were attached to her head, torso and limbs, and were affected by her body motion and temperature. Body movement contributed to deviations in pitch, and as Burgoyne explained, in *Digital Body I*, the gear actually controlled her movement, creating a tension between the technology and her physical body.⁶ The sounds produced were, in general, very jarring often causing an instinctive need to turn away from the sound. The anxiety-producing sounds arguably heightened the psychological impact of the piece and raised awareness of Burgoyne's role as a human within the technological "system."

As Barbara Fischer, then curator of Open Space and organizer of the Victoria *Locations* project, described the performance:

By moving very slowly and carefully, Burgoyne could control the sound and either diminish or accelerate it. At times people followed her on her route through the downtown streets; some people were not only curious but also listened intently. Others would step out of her way, rather shy and perplexed. Another group would remain on the other side of the street watching her performance from a safe distance. And then there was

someone who thought there was something wrong with her and asked her whether she needed “help”. The work was simply a projection of art into a public context and was not aimed at a particular condition or social group, but it provoked this rich spectrum of involvement that occurs when something unusual happens.⁷

A videotape of Burgoyne’s performance was on view in the gallery for the duration of the exhibition. The video demonstrates what Fischer describes—a range of people with different reactions, but for the most part, Burgoyne’s ‘audience’ was confused. Viewers would look at her from a safe distance so as to appear that they were not staring at what looked like a human controlled by a machine. In fact, Diana’s body was manipulating the “machine” to behave a certain way. Perhaps it is even more complicated: Diana manipulated the machine to create the desired sound she wanted, but these sounds required her to manipulate her body into uncomfortable distortions.

Recalling this performance at a recent interview at Open Space in August 2011, Burgoyne described the way in which the performance was composed to demonstrate both sound and physical tension. As she explained it (but the edited video does not reveal), every so often she would purposefully stop walking and stand as an (awkward) frozen figure to shut off the sound. Burgoyne described this as an expression of the transference of sound, or “acoustic tension”, which was alleviated by the tension absorbed by her body, which, in turn, demonstrated a kind of visual tension. When she stood in these silent postures every twenty feet or so, an observant viewer could see the cause and effect of dissonant sound and the way in which Burgoyne’s body captured this discomfort. In her 2011 interview, Burgoyne was candid about how physically and emotionally demanding her artistic practice is.

Burgoyne has also acknowledged the difficulty of performing in public without a context for her work.⁸ She described being grabbed by a passer-by who was trying to direct her back to the camera and almost pushed her into the street. A friend who saw Burgoyne ‘performing’ thought that she must have had a

terrible accident which required her to wear electronics to control her limbs. As Burgoyne saw it, without a context, viewers created their own context for the work, with often surprising results. Burgoyne concluded that her public performance was actually somewhat invasive to public audiences.⁹ Although many of the other artists involved in *Locations/ National* faced similar public misunderstandings,¹⁰ all of their works were at least understood as ‘artist-experimentations.’ More often than not, Burgoyne’s work became some sort of electronically-manipulated human misfortune. The discomfort that the public experienced with Burgoyne’s unification of body and technology may even provoked a kind of audience alienation.

However, whatever the misfires caused by her work, as we look back on the 1983 *Locations/ National* performance, we can see that it was important to Burgoyne’s evolution as an artist that she perform outside a gallery setting: her work is not only about an individual artistic expression, but also about society and society’s relationship with technology. It was not simply an aesthetic project, nor was it purely performance; it was also sociological. Burgoyne was interested in getting community feedback and participation. As she described it, she was interested in starting up a ‘dialogue’. It is not surprising, therefore, that Open Space invited her to seek out a more public setting. Burgoyne accepted the invitation because she was interested in sparking a discussion in a larger community, even if most of her audience may not have recognized her work as having anything to do with “art”.

As part of her continuing evolution, Burgoyne returned to Open Space in 1992 to perform in the *October Project*. By this time, her work had developed and her process had changed in an effort to overcome the alienation of her watchers; to ensure that the themes of her work were actively expressed. Instead of performing *to* an audience, Burgoyne performed *with* her audience, by enabling it to interact directly with her home-made technologies. In this way, the works changed the relationship between the artist, the audience and the work:

The work places an expectation on the viewer to interact with the piece, but in order to fulfill the expectation the viewer has to confront the performer as an art object and as a person.¹¹

The open invitation to interact with the piece and with the artist directly makes the “viewer-performers” aware of their role in the work and their relationship to it. As such, they become aware of their responsibility as contributors to co-construct a dialogue—to ask questions and critically respond.

Burgoyne’s work was made up of three parts: the first part asked the question “what do you think the mind is?” One transmitter (worn by a male) and two receivers (worn by females), would play voices answering to the question. The transmitters were detected and recreated by the helmet-receivers worn by the women when they came within a certain distance of the male transmitter. In Burgoyne’s words, “the performance was the inter-action of the three performers.”¹²

The second part built on the first but this time, recalled a traumatic event. The two women with the helmet receivers on their head wound patterns through five evenly spaced transmitters mounted on stands. The audiotape played the voices of five members of a family describing the same harrowing event—a fire in their home.

In the third part, Burgoyne’s work explored technologically-mediated human interaction through story-telling. The artist wore a helmet-receiver wound between two video monitors. The video-monitors showed various faces of individuals who provided short anecdotal stories of their lives. The audiotape was also transmitted such that sound could be heard coming out of Burgoyne’s helmet only when she passed by each of the video monitors. As Gail Tuttle wrote in her curatorial essay, story-telling was an important aspect of the Burgoyne’s *October Project*: the ‘inter-active process’ of story-telling revealed much about the subtleties and complexities of human and technologically assisted communication.¹³

Taken together, Burgoyne's work builds on her creation of an intimate physical relationship with modern technology. She both manipulates it, and is manipulated by it. In the result, she compels us to ask searching questions about our increasingly close, indeed pervasive, relationship to technology. Is it inherently dehumanizing? Does it stunt our relationship with other human beings or does it actually open up new possibilities for story-telling and connection? What is the role of the creator of art/ communication/ technology? What is the role of the receiver/ listener? What is the role of the technology itself: is it merely the transmitter, or is it something more? What do her projects have to do with art, with "folk art"?

Burgoyne describes herself as an "electronic folk artist"—a deliberate and rather provocative title that provides us with an entry point to understand her work. The category of "folk art" does not necessarily help viewers understand a particular style of art; rather, it invites us to examine the art according to "social worlds."¹⁴ As many scholars on the subject have pointed out, the term "folk art" is often used to describe what the art is *not*, inviting synonyms such as "outsider", "primitive", "non-academic". However, understanding Burgoyne's work according to what it is not, does not help us approach it. Burgoyne's own definition of electronic folk art can be traced to an artist talk she attended by the late Martin Bartlett at the University of Victoria in 1980. According to Burgoyne:

Bartlett defined folk-art as having grown out of a non-academic, community based tradition. The creator, usually without training produces the work from local, readily available materials.¹⁵

In other words, we need to ask a different question: not what is 'folk art,' but how can we understand folk art in our particular time and place? Burgoyne's work suggests that we consider folk art not by assessing the art objects pure aesthetic qualities ('primitive' or 'naïve' or 'whimsical') but on social, historical, economic and cultural bases.¹⁶

Thus, Bartlett suggested a \$10 Casio keyboard was a folk instrument in our technological society: in common with traditional crafts of non-western societies—where we have often derived the idea of ‘folk art’—it is inexpensive, easily accessible and requires no ‘formal’ training to use. Similarly, Burgoyne’s home-made ‘technologies’ are produced using inexpensive materials from her neighborhood Radio Shack; they require little training to create. In fact, Burgoyne has compared her home-made technologies to mask-making, which has a long folk tradition. Like the mask-maker, she creates wearable sculptures which are enacted in performance and serve to change the identity of the wearer.¹⁷ At the same time, Burgoyne’s electronic ‘masks’ and ‘costumes’ require a body in order to be enacted. They are not electronics which divorce themselves from the possibility of human interaction—their life comes from human movement.¹⁸

This ‘humanness’ can be seen in every aspect of Burgoyne’s process. Her electronic sculptures reveal exposed circuitry. They are not concealed in a perfect plastic case; they are the product of human hands. In the 2011 interview, Burgoyne described her work as a process of “humanizing through the physicality of the making...when the human-hand is seen there is still a human element.” We can read these ideas in a Marxist vein: where our ‘humanness’ is derived from our ability to create through labour. Burgoyne enables this creativity and ‘builds’ her technology such that we are able to identify both the product and the producer.

Viewed from this perspective, Burgoyne’s work manifests both a positive and negative approach to human technology: she humanizes and demystifies the soulless machine, but perhaps, at the same time, it dehumanizes her. She reveals the way in which technology interrupts human interaction, but also uses technology to *create* human interaction. Looking back to her piece at Open Space in 1992, she used recording technology to play tapes of individuals telling stories about a traumatic event or the intimate details of their lives. Her message is not only that we rarely interact with other humans directly, but is more

nuanced. Burgoyne's audience/ performers are not passive listeners half-asleep on their couch watching a news story which took place in another part of the world; they are not sitting at their computers. Burgoyne is adamant about this point. She believes her work cannot be understood unless her viewers directly experience it: "there is an expectation that people interact and play with it."¹⁹ In other words, Burgoyne's audience must use their own bodies (not just eyes and ears) to see and hear the stories; they are required to *interact* with the storytellers even if their physical presence is just a recording. At the same time, they must interact with Burgoyne's physical presence which is captured by the technological system she has created—her human-made machines.

Her audiences reactions are varied: with no defined instructions from the artist, her audience is faced with the decision whether or not to interact with the piece. As such, her work cannot be truly experienced from merely watching video documentation. Physicality is important in her work; it is about being in a space with the artist and creating a "physical connection to physical objects and to the physical presence of [the artist] as a human being in that space." As she said in her 2011 interview, an individual watching video documentation "cannot understand that there is even conundrum" to participate with the work. In many ways, the "conundrum" Burgoyne is describing arises from our inherently complicated relationship to technology: how we interact with it and how we use it to relate to one another.

Burgoyne's projects threw up all of these questions, long before personal computers, the internet and social media. Her work reveals her considerable prescience: looking back on her performances is to understand the continuing power of her art and its themes. In her most recent interview, Burgoyne made clear that she herself is intrigued by these shifts; she wonders about how our shifting relationship with technology would alter her audience's reactions and responses if she were to perform her work today: "what do [we] think the mind is?"

¹ “News Release: 3rd Annual Live Computer Music Concert,” Open Space Archives, Victoria, B.C. (Box6, File 1983:M7).

² Diana Burgoyne, “Artist’s Statement, Music By Computers Series,” Open Space Archives, Victoria, B.C. (Box 6, File 1983: M7).

³ “The Body Electric,” *Monday Magazine*, June 2, 1993. Open Space Archives, Victoria, B.C. (Box 6, File 1983: M7).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Diana Burgoyne and Jeremy Turner, e-mail interview conducted 2006.

⁷ Barbara Fischer, “Victoria”, *Locations/ National Exhibition Catalogue*. (1983) Open Space Archives, Victoria, B.C.

⁸ Interview with Diana Burgoyne conducted at Open Space, August 2011.

⁹ Burgoyne and Turner, 2006.

¹⁰ For example, Nick Brdar’s *Test Pattern*, a sculptural work installed on Dallas Road which was unscrewed and knocked over by an uncomfortable local. [See Fischer].

¹¹ Gail Tuttle, “Open Space ’92: The October Project,” *Open Space 20 Years* (Victoria, BC: Open Space, 1983), p. 18.

¹² Burgoyne, “Three Untitled Pieces,” Open Space Archives, Victoria B.C.

¹³ Tuttle, 18.

¹⁴ John Michael Vlach and Simon J. Bronner (eds.) , “Folk Art and Art Worlds.” (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986), p. 11.

¹⁵ Burgoyne, “Folk Art in the Digital Age”, Surrey Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C., 2005.

¹⁶ This is inspired by a round-table, “Electronic Folk Art: Electronic Folk Art?!” discussion in which Burgoyne participated in February 2005 at the Surrey Art Gallery. The discussion was held in conjunction with Burgoyne’s exhibition *He Transmits/ She Receives*. The idea of re-phrasing the question comes from speaker Don Krug.

¹⁷ Burgoyne, “Electronic Folk Art: Electronic Folk Art?!” Surrey Art Gallery, February 6, 2005.

¹⁸ Daniel Joliffe, “Diana Burgoyne: Gesture and the Handmade”, Surrey Art Gallery, 2004.

¹⁹ Burgoyne, 2011.