

Art exhibit gets a laugh out of technology

The relationship between culture and technology is one of the hottest issues on the contemporary art scene. It has been explored in any number of exhibitions of which *Guerrilla Tactics*, which runs at A Space (183 Bathurst St.) until July 4, is the most recent.

Unlike most such shows, this one incorporates much of the technology that makes artists so uneasy. As Nancy Paterson, curator of and contributor to the exhibition, points out, "Art which refers to electronic technology is possibly the most effective strategy for those determined to criticize and expose the ideologies underlying mass culture."

Guerrilla Tactics includes works by six artists: Maggie Dorning, Juan Geuer, Lynn Hershman, D. Nile, David Rockeby and Paterson. None of these are exactly household names; most being young artists showing occasionally whenever they get the chance. (I wonder if *that* ever makes them stop and think about the "ideologies underlying mass culture.")

Ironically, the show makes it clear how well-suited technology is to artists attempting humor. Something about all these computers uselessly whirring, clicking and buzzing is quite hilarious.

Take D. Nile's piece, *Money*, for example. It consists of a walk-in display case/booth set up with computers to resemble and function like one of those instant bank machines that dot the city. We stand at one end, typing in our answers to a series of questions. Except for the last one, which asks for your "secret ambition," they are the typical dumb questions we'd expect.

The difference is that the



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machine gives us silly responses printed on a piece of paper that has a \$1 bill attached. "Money is the centre of our culture," says Nile, a 30-year-old Toronto artist whose real name is Bob James, "and technology represents our dreams."

The two come gloriously together, he says, in the automated teller machine. I have a horrible feeling he's right. In this case, technology has fulfilled one of our most basic fantasies, to be able to get our hands on some money at any time of the day or night.

Best of all, in giving out money free, Nile's creation "is undermining the Canadian economic system."

Very good, D. Nile. Too bad it's not for real. Like his whole installation, it's a joke. And jokes may make us laugh, but they don't change the world.

Neither will Paterson's piece, *Hair Salon TV*, an amusing installation consisting of three chairs and hairdryers from a 1950s beauty salon. Instead of heads, the dryers are filled with small televisions playing excerpts from movies, sitcoms, commercials and anything else that portrays women dealing with technology.

"Most women are very passive about technology," Paterson says. "They could demand so many things from it, but they don't."

Then there's David Rockeby's quite wonderful sound sculpture, *Echoing Narcissus*. It uses a voice

processor that plays back sounds in a cycle of descending fifths. The computer is contained within a copper pedestal that resembles a drinking fountain. At the bottom is a sheet of Mylar that ripples like water and enables viewers to see their own reflections.

Of course, the piece has been a hit with gallery-goers of all ages. The Toronto artist says the intention was to explore "the ways that technology modifies, enhances and distorts our image of ourselves."

The theme of audience participation is continued in Lynn Hershman's interactive video, *Lorna*. Viewers are invited to get involved by pressing different buttons that alter the course of the storyline. The problem was that the user has to be a master of the technology to get anything out of it. The work, which was displayed in last year's Venice Biennale, is one of those pieces that looks better on paper than in real life.

A more political work is Juan Geuer's *Siglo Veinte*. Named for a tiny Bolivian mining village, it recreates roughly the kind of tin shack the miners and their families live in. The centre of the room is filled with a hanging color TV that runs an endless series of very slick commercials. A hanging speaker tells the story of miners, their wives and their circumstances. Geuer, whom Paterson calls "the grand-daddy of electronic art in Canada," spent 15 years in South America. It is an emotional piece but somehow fails to assert itself in the presence of so much irony and humor.

The only real dud, however, is *B.R. Formis: Perfect Bureaucrat*, by Maggie Dorning. With a large Fibreglas ant and phony-sounding robot voice, it is too cliched to be taken seriously.