

Art and Technology: Paradise Refracted

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[See table of contents](#)

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Art and Technology: PARADISE REFRACTED

Technology is a slippery thing. Tectonic even, discontinuously sliding and shifting beneath the weight of societal paradigms. Yesterday's inventive bit of technology—the pencil, the zipper, even the fork—becomes so much a part of the artefactual landscape we cease thinking of it. It recedes into the background and becomes part of the social and cultural wallpaper—useful to be sure, but old hat. New technologies, faster, sexier ways of doing things, are forefronted in our thoughts. *Underfoot*, things move.

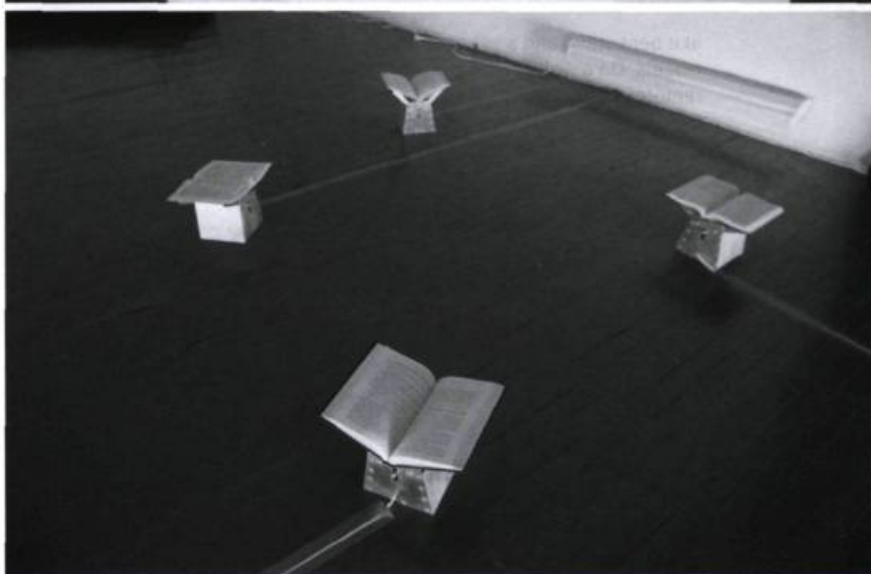
It was a tectonic shift in technology that, long ago, led someone to take a piece of woven cloth and stretch it across a wooden framework and then apply pigments onto the surface plane that was created. Though it is a technological shift that has long been superseded, it is, like the pencil, zipper and fork, a technology still in use, a technology generally unregarded and unconsidered. It is just there, part of the background, unquestioned. The stretched canvas, after all, isn't sexy. *Computer imaging* is, but its technological sexiness has been had at a price all very much a part of the fissuring that has split the humanities—the arts—from the sciences.

Art and Technology: Paradise Refracted, bringing together the work of four artists—K.C. Adams, John Jeffrey, Victoria Scott, and Norman T. White—, grapples in part with the tectonic nature of technology, but also confronts the chasm that has grown wide between art and technology, between humanities and sciences. Where once the two were inseparably melded together—in his day, Michelangelo was known as much (if not more) for his military engineering skills and talents as for artistic abilities—, now there exists the vast gulf of misunderstanding that writer C.P. Snow described in his 1959 book, *The Two Cultures*. And while tech-

nologies like the computer were supposed to help close the gap, it hasn't quite worked out that way. Amongst a growing number of visual artists attempting to rethink the questions posed by the great divide are the four that McLaughlin Gallery curator David Aurandt chose for inclusion in this exhibition.

Victoria Scott's *e-motional response #1* (2001) deals with a virtually perfect technology that has survived intact and (almost) unscathed for hundreds of years, one in which form and function meld together as one: the book. Across the floor of the gallery are scattered eleven books, each mounted and held open for visual inspection on what appear to be small, metal bookstands. But to attempt to approach any one of the books is to goad it into a response: a noisy, mechanical snapping shuts the volume. Upon retreat, the book opens again, the entire procedure controlled by a video camera monitoring visitor activity in the vicinity of the work, and a computer program that triggers the response to human incursion. Like some warped technological version of a Venus Flytrap, Scott's work jealously defends its text, and whatever secrets lie therein, from prying intellects.

Norman T. White's *The Helpless Robot* (1987-99) addresses the permeable membrane where technology and its users meet and interface. Sitting by itself in a small ante-room, White's sculpture looks for all the world like some primitive flight simulator. Atop a circular stand, a metal and plywood form that resembles a stylized flat-bottomed boat flipped upside down is equipped with handles that allow one to easily swivel the structure on its base. Which is precisely what the work nags and pleads for us to do, courtesy a voice emanating from a hidden speaker. "I'm harmless, come on in," it urges as we draw close. But once there, we become its hapless servants, ordered to move it about back and forth, berated ("Can you, like, listen to me?") and bullied into doing its bidding.



Being rudely browbeaten and coerced by an inanimate object and engaging in willing subjugation to its whims is a novel experience. We are, after all, accustomed to being manipulated by our technologies in far subtler ways.

Of the three separate works here by K.C. Adams, by far the most successful was the interactive *Cyborg: Phase IV (Development)* (2001), a series of five small, mixed-media forms, each about the size of a small melon. They resemble nothing so much as props from a 1950s science fiction film, organic, pod-like things covered in odd ridges or

protruding bumps. Each is also equipped with a button—some bright red and / or larger than others—that tempts the pushing. We are, and we do, intrigued as to what might possibly happen. Not much, actually. On one work, a series of small LEDs blink on and off, on another a small fan whirs, and on yet another a small wire protruding from one end of the pod twirls in the air. It's all quite silly, really, undercutting our expectations of these alien things, expectations built upon an equation linking the novel and exotic with the presumption of technological sophistication. "Any sufficiently advanced tech-

JOHN JEFFREYS, *Auto Info Moto*, 1994. Detail. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

VICTORIA SCOTT, *e-motional response #1*, 2001. Installation detail. Mixed media. 16 sculptures, each approximately 30 x 30 x 22 cm. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

Michele Karch-Ackerman: *LOST MARGARET*

nology," wrote novelist Arthur C. Clarke, "is indistinguishable from magic." Close enough.

Occupying the floor of one side of the gallery, John Jeffreys's *Auto Info Moto* (1994) comprises an enormous mound of paper, the apparent byproducts of an office environment. A thick black line laid out on scattered sheets of bond paper forming a flat plain surrounding the mountainous interior outlines the entire piece. Closer inspection reveals that the outline is that of the shape of the United States—the "lower forty-eight," to be precise. Resting on the line is a small clear-plastic human head (anatomically correct), set atop a carriage comprised of some electronics, an appendage resembling an eyeball peering downward from the end of a bent stalk, and a set of small wheels. On a wall nearby is a remote control device. We can, it seems, make this thing move. We do, and it does, in jerky forward motions, tracing the black line which itself turns out to be an extended line of text, all rendered in upper case, stating things like "WE DONT EVER WATCH ALL 100 CHANNELS BUT WE LIKE TO KNOW THEY ARE THERE IF WE WANT TO." The eyeball attached to the front of the head's under-carriage is actually a small optical reader focused on the line of text and translating the figure of black letters and ground of white space into the shuddering, discontinuous motions of this little machine.

Occasionally Jeffreys's machine goes off course, lurches to an unintended stop, and needs our help in getting itself back on track. It's reassuring to know, in spite of all the tectonic activity metaphorically going on underfoot, that we still have a place in the greater scheme of things. ■

*Art and Technology:
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Transformation is an integral component for the reading of work by Michele Karch-Ackerman. In her recent exhibition, *Lost Margaret*, which was held at the Grimsby Public Art Gallery, transformation works on a thematic, technical and compositional level.

Inspired by her re-reading of L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* series, Karch-Ackerman was particularly struck by the story of Anne's loss of her first baby. This child, formally named Joyce but called Joy by Anne and her husband Gilbert, was still-born. In dealing with her grief, Anne and Gilbert visit an old friend of theirs, Captain Jim. While they sit together by the sea, Captain Jim tells Anne the story of his lost love, Margaret. Fifty years ago, he tells Anne, Margaret fell asleep in her father's dory and drifted out to sea. It was believed that she drowned during a thundersquall, although her body was never found. The Captain says to Anne, "The sea took her from me, but some day I'll find her. It can't

keep us apart forever." He then tells Anne that as long as someone is remembered, they are never really gone, and when he dies it will be Anne's memory of his story that will keep his Margaret alive. It was this passage that provided the stimulus for Karch-Ackerman's body of work.

Until very recently, stillbirths, infant death, and the loss of young children were all too common occurrences in people's daily life. It is something that contemporary society has distanced itself from, not wanting to acknowledge it perhaps, in some atavistic superstition that to do so will increase the likelihood of it happening to us. However, it was, and remains, a fact of life. Karch-Ackerman noted how infant and children's death was the subject of, or occurred in many of her readings, ranging from letters and journals written by eighteenth and nineteenth century pioneer women such as Susannah Moodie through to the children's literature of the same period. She noted how these fictional and real men and women dealt with their grief upon losing

their babies and children. Concurrently with these readings, Karch-Ackerman also began to explore and discover lost and forgotten pioneer gravesites. In one such place she found a very simple grave marker, a suspended iron heart, with the simple inscription "Martha, Age 3". While the gravesite was overrun with bush and trees, Karch-Ackerman found that the feeling wasn't actually one of neglect, but that the new growth over the gravesites was an affirmation of life and continuing spirit. For her, these children weren't dead and gone, they had not ceased to exist; rather, they had experienced a transformation.

Inspired by the gravesite discoveries and in conjunction with her readings, Karch-Ackerman created two important bodies of work, *The Sweet Breath of Trees* and *Flower Girl*. In both exhibitions, she incorporated natural elements such as flowers and trees, found historical photographs, text and ritual. The rituals were designed to work on two levels: aesthetically and metaphorically. Karch-



MICHELE KARCH-ACKERMAN, *Performance ritual*, Pouch Cove, Newfoundland.
Photo: Martin K. Ackerman.