

Shock Art

Exit Art's 'Electric Lab' show could use a little more voltage

by Robert Shuster

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Until encountering Bryan Mesenbourg's installation at Exit Art, you probably wouldn't associate capital punishment with the russet potato. But climb a steep wooden platform and sit in the artist's menacing electric chair, and you'll experience a spud-powered execution. Sparks sizzle, a lit sign commands you to "Repent," and nine volts course through your body—all powered by 867 wired-up potatoes. The chair belongs to a kind of pep rally for engineering genius (and longtime New Yorker) Nikola Tesla—an engaging (if sometimes ho-hum) group show on electricity that blends art, high-school science, arcade amusements, and lots of power.



So much power that the apparent danger forms half the experience. For several works, the volts run into the tens of thousands. Signs warn viewers with pacemakers or heart conditions to stand back. Near the entrance, setting the tone of threat, Arnaldo Morales's two high-powered industrial contraptions hang from the ceiling without the usual barriers to keep you safely distant; a giant Jacob's ladder straight out of Frankenstein produces a rising and snapping arc, and next to it, a heavy black box ominously hums. Because you have to stand very close to see what the box does—a slight disturbance of water by an invisible jet of unexplained force—its art comes not so much from the subtle action, but from intimidation. Baffling technology becomes Conceptual art, generating Tangible fear.

Many of the works summon your direct participation, and like Coney Island's old "Test Your Strength" games, they publicly measure your spiritual, physical, and sexual energies. You'll work up a sweat pulling on the oars of an ancient rowing machine, trying to generate enough power to create St. Elmo's fire inside Seth Weiner's jar of low-pressure air. You can also yank belfry-like ropes to make sparking music, and turn an enormous crank to store energy for later use. In one corner, Brendan McGillicuddy has fashioned a Vegas-style version of Scientology's e-meter, that supposed gauge of emotional states: You stand before two mirrored panels and dip your hands into troughs of electrified water, turning your body into a conductor to power light and music, which surge to a level based on your fluid content. The electrodynamics of Revel Woodard's elegant love seat are similar but not so soothing; modeled after the Victorian tête-à-tête chair—two seats facing each other and sharing an armrest—it sends a significant jolt of electricity through you and your companion when you touch each other. Bad hearts, beware.

Either as art or science, none of these devices offer revelations. Like a lot of interactive work, they're one-stunt wonders that never quite feel complex enough in the individual experience. But add a larger human response—in other words, a crowd—and they become far more variable. On the gallery's opening night, for example, couples in the love seat were sticking wet fingers into each other's ears, arm wrestling, and kissing with coins in their mouths. The shock-value exhibitionism was maybe inspired by Arthur Elsenaar and Remko Scha's nearby wall-projected video loop of a man's face, in close-up, crazily twitching as his muscles respond to signals sent through attached electrodes. It's another reminder of Frankenstein: electricity as an animating force, transforming the ordinary into voluntary and involuntary performance art. Come to the gallery on November 1 and you'll see a live example of both, as dancers wear neuro-muscular stimulators.



Shock Art (...continued)

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Amid all the entertainment, a few tokens to the energy-conscious seem like party poopers. An artist who calls himself Flash Light has constructed solar-powered candles from tin cans (the bulb of one blinks the rhythm of a tango, trying hard to join the fun); Simon Schiessl has fashioned a collapsed transmission tower out of flickering fluorescent tubes, which seems to suggest our over-reliance on the electric grid; and the Bruce High Quality Foundation mocks BP Gas with a filling station powered by several dozen lemons and limes that form the company's logo. But the protest hasn't been particularly fruitful. A week after the opening, the citrus was rotting, and power for the work's music came from Con Ed.

You might think that Melissa Dubbin and Aaron S. Davidson's neon script stating "Fuck You Edison" offers a similar anti-establishment complaint. But, in fact, the angry dismissal—which copies Tesla's handwriting—refers to the feud between Edison and Tesla over the merits of direct and alternating current (a feud that Tesla eventually won when AC proved more efficient). The show includes only a couple of other works that refer directly to Tesla, but it might be Kelly Dobson's lung-like pouch that best conjures the scientist's inventive spirit. The soft portable device is designed to unobtrusively record your sudden angst-filled scream, storing the sound until you decide to release it at a more appropriate moment. The biggest disappointment of the show is that, in this city of high-voltage stress, you can't test the thing out.

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