

Mad science

Throwing or thinking, participants tackle technology

By Mary Thomas
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Ever have one of those days when your computer's turned ornery and you'd like to return the favor?

Join the queue that should be forming at Wood Street Galleries, Downtown, and ease those frustrations at the "Cathartic User Interface (CUI)," an installation by Brooklyn artist Perry Hoberman that's part tech structure, part carry booth.

Participants vent at a bank of PC keyboards by pelting them with rubber balls, which initiates one of a number of projected responses.

"You have no new mail. You have no friends. You have no life."

Fire off those projectiles and get revenge.

"CUT" is the show's title work, and the most straightforward of three interactive installations that are immensely approachable — even to non-geeks.

Hoberman will give a free gallery talk at 1 p.m. today and will also present his performance work "Let's Make a Monster" at 10 p.m. (see details below).

Part of the elite group of international electronic artists who are better known and appreciated in Europe than in the United States, Hoberman has exhibited and won awards at such prestigious venues as the Prix Ars Electronica and ICC Biennale.

His credits are varied, and include having been projectionist, musician, visual director and producer for Laurie Anderson; taught at the Cooper Union and the School of Visual Arts in New York; exhibited seven times at edgy Postmasters Gallery, New York City; and been art director at Telepresence Research, a Silicon Valley virtual reality company; plus numerous performances and "spectacles."

An outsider insider, Hoberman uses low- and high-tech components in works that raise questions about our love-hate relationship with technology — heavy issues guised in playful and engaging presentation.

A longtime aficionado of movies, science fiction and comics, those elements feed his "Monster" performance. Like the possessed character in a B-movie, Hoberman sits at a dramatically lighted control panel mixing clips from horror and science fiction films with material from biotechnology Web sites to birth his creature within a cataclysmic roar of images.



Brooklyn artist Perry Hoberman's interactive installation "Timetable" allows up to 12 participants to simultaneously influence projected images.

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It's pure theater — reality given a wry twist. Hoberman says: "The mythology of the mad scientist taps into a lot of the ways that people fantasize about technology. They see it as a determining force." He says the fictional mad scientist and the esoteric ideas in biotechnology and bioscience — cloning, uploading brains to computers — are connected. "The difference between regular and mad scientists — all want to achieve world domination — is the mad scientists are the ones who brag about it."

The installation "Systems Maintenance" draws a bead on how notions of space are formulated and the influence of virtual space on perception. Brightly painted simplified furniture forms are presented life-sized, in 1/2 scale and on a computer monitor, recalling in some ways Joseph Kosuth's 1960s conceptual renderings. When partici-

pants move the pieces around, they become part of a complex video-projected overlay of images within what plays as a new cubism.

The most complex — and perhaps intriguing — work is "Timetable," in which up to 12 participants seated around a circular table may simultaneously alter a central projected image. The clock-face format is only one of many readings — e.g. corporate board room, Chinese restaurant table, seance — that participants may react to, exploring notions of time, effecting change and being pulled into others' spheres of influence.

While the term "user" is often ascribed to visitors to new media works, Hoberman prefers "participants." He explains that "user" probably came from the notion that people "use" a computer. "To me, it's not the interactivity that's important. It's the act of participating that's important. I think 'participant' gets the right balance — a shared responsibility between the author and the user. You're both cul-

pable in some way. User isn't a terrible word. I guess it also sort of has addictive connotations.

"Maybe that's appropriate," he adds, with the gentle, poking and intelligent humor that permeates his work.

"Make a Monster" will be performed at 801 Liberty Ave., Downtown. Seating's limited to 125 persons (no reservations) and a \$5 donation is suggested. The exhibition continues at 601 Wood St. (Wood Street Galleries, above the "T") through May 18. Gallery hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays and 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays. For information, call 412-471-5605.