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Beauty and the Gizmo
 There will be something for everybody to like at the 2003 CyberArts Festival. It's just going to be a matter of finding it.

by Margaret Weigel



"Beatbug" from the "Toy Symphony" performance. MIT Media Lab

Don't let the name fool you. The [2003 Boston CyberArts Festival](#) (April 26 - May 11, 2003 at various locations) is neither limited to Boston, nor is it only about arts that could be called 'cyber' in nature, whatever 'cyber' means. It will be, however, an actual, not a virtual, festival of grand proportions, with over fifty events spread between Providence in Rhode Island and Portland in Maine. Chances are a Boston CyberArts event is coming to a gallery, performance hall, storefront, or street corner near you. There are even cyber activities planned for the under-18 age set.


As for readers glued to their terminal screens, don't despair: there will also be [festival activities](#) that take place exclusively online. From kinetic sculptures and interactive videos to 'landscape mosaics' and the "reality telephone game show," this year's [Boston CyberArts Festival](#) encompasses an eclectic selection of innovative, technologically enhanced art from around the globe for our cultural delectation.

Why does an innovative international festival of this scope and significance call Boston home? After all, Boston is not New York City, the anointed cultural king of the cutting-edge. George Fifield, a founder and current director of [Boston CyberArts](#), quickly counters that Boston's top-notch technology, research and education sectors have produced

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cutting-edge art now for several decades, long before the advent of hypertext, web pages, and the New Economy. Writing an "Art and Technology" column for "Art New England" in the mid-90s convinced Fifield that Boston's new media denizens were underexposed and underappreciated, and inspired him to organize the initial CyberArts Festival in 1999. "For the first [one], we said we'd be happy if we had, say, 20 participants," he says with a rueful laugh. "Instead, we got close to 60 organizations that were interested."

The first [Boston CyberArts festival](#) was the right event at the right time, nicely jibing with the technophilia of the late-90s. Four years later, the Festival has more than doubled in size, despite the current growing pains of the new media industry. And for Bostonians suffering from Second City syndrome, consider this: no festival in the world rivals the collaborative depth and breadth of Boston CyberArts. With dozens of local institutions hosting over 50 multimedia, visual, and musical events over a two-week period, the Festival has become the premiere stage for highlighting new media and technological experimentation that transcend utilitarian applications.

The exhibitions at [this year's CyberArts](#) include Boston-based artists and collectives alongside more nationally-recognized colleagues. Digital printmaking pioneer Dorothy Simpson Krause, for one, does triple-duty at the Festival, curating the TechArts show at the South Shore Art Center, exhibiting mixed-media work, and hosting a printmaking workshop. The festival also boasts the world premiere of MIT Media Lab music guru Todd Machover's latest opus "Toy Symphony," a joint venture of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project and the Media Lab.

A number of [exhibits](#) contextualize the rise of new media by examining the technological antecedents of the digital revolution. The Art Interactive gallery in Cambridge, MA will host an exhibition of early media machines, including Naim June Pak's 1969 Paik/Abe video synthesizer. Curator Dana Moser oversees "The Ballad of Wire and Hands" at Newton's New Art Center, a collection of interactive installation and kinetic sculptures reflecting a century's worth of experimental techniques. And even in the new media landscape, there is room for the venerable product of the printing press, albeit transformed. Deborah Davidson curates an exhibit of innovative reinventions of the book form at Mobius.

There are also three conferences on the agenda of [this year's Festival](#): an eNarrative conference (May 10-11, 2003), the Visual Improvisation Symposium

(May 4, 2003) and the groundbreaking Digital Art and Public Space (DAPS) conference (April 26-27, 2003), the first national gathering on digital and interactive public art. DAPS promises to explore "the expanding definition of public space in the 21st century," and offers a number of activities on Boston area streets and parks, including the antics of New York's infamous Surveillance Camera Players. Another compelling project is the Nature and Inquiry Artists Group's "Invisible Ideas" activity on Boston Commons. Participants receive a GPS-enhanced PDA, which will spontaneously display words, sounds, and images triggered by one's location inside the Commons.

Three conferences, more than 40 exhibits and close to a dozen performances comprise the bulk of the [2003 Boston CyberArts Festival](#), which doesn't count the web-based activities or "Cloud Place," the festival headquarters for kids at Boston's Back Bay area. And therein lays a potential problem: the overwhelming size of the Boston CyberArts Festival. Fifield defines the curatorial mission of the Festival as 'relating to technology' with 'technology' open to interpretation, but as the Fort Point Arts Community Gallery acknowledges in its exhibition literature, "most likely technology has some influence on all artwork". Many exhibits, but not all, are computer-based; many exhibits, but not all, are interactive.

Then, there are the laboratory creations: in a nod to the burgeoning transgenic art movement, [Boston CyberArts 2003](#) will feature "The Pigs Wings Project," living tissue manipulated into a wing shape. Blenders? Telephones? Photography? Holograms? Videos? Palm Pilots? They are all here. Broader themes will most likely be difficult to discern because of the chaotic profusion. But, after all, a smorgasbord is designed to be consumed selectively. There's something for everyone at the Festival – it's just going to be a matter of finding it. And the conjunction of high-end technology and aesthetics raises plenty of questions.

For example, just as the comic strip Dilbert draws its inspiration from a dysfunctional white-collar workplace, a number of the exhibits in this year's [Boston CyberArts Festival](#) look at the sophisticated machinery that surrounds us and asks: "What does it all mean?" Also, some visitors may inquire pertinently enough, "This device is really cool, but is it art?" More than in most non-traditional art exhibitions, the festival boasts a high "shock and awe" gadget quotient.

The 'art' part of the [Boston CyberArts](#) equation is imperiled by the impressive lineup of whistles and

bells. But, after all, art is in the eye of the beholder and there is going to be a great deal to behold. Viewers will encounter eye-popping spectacle, technological ingenuity, and, somewhere along the way, something that stirs the heart and soul.

[Click here](#) for comprehensive information on the 2003 Boston CyberArts Festival and an easy-to-use and comprehensive guide to the festival's activities.

[Margaret Weigel](#) reviews arts for [WBUR](#), Boston's NPR News station.

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