



NET WORTH

by Ben Davis

"Networked Nature," Jan. 11-Feb. 18, 2007, at Foxy Production, 617 W. 27th St., New York, N.Y. 10001

There's actually not that much that is networked about the artworks by six art teams and artists in Foxy Production's "Networked Nature" show. Instead, the exhibition is an essay in an increasingly popular style: the estheticized science project.

What the imprecise title does do is gesture towards a theme -- artworks that tackle the murky border between technology and nature, a hot-button issue in these days of anxiety about man-made environmental disaster. Sponsored in part by the College Art Association and scheduled to coincide with the yearly talk-fest's roll through town, this spare, focused show is custom-built to lend itself to weighty pontificating. What's interesting, however, is not so much what it all says about science as what it says about the internal contradictions of this breed of experimental art itself (curator Marisa Olson works for Rhizome.org, the influential web art advocates, and is thus particularly, ahem, plugged in).

Take Gail Wight's three-screen video *Creep*, for instance. Citing the lab esthetic, it features three time-lapse images of dyed slime-molds flowering on plates, going through different stages and changes, thereby apparently spinning art directly from the juncture

of nature and culture. In the past, Wight has done such stunts as create an opera with crickets playing all the parts, or reading books on fish evolution to fish.

Spending time in front of *Creep*, however, it becomes clear that there is another latent tension here. On the one hand, the video's artistic identity is secured by citing art history in the form of the triptych, juxtaposing the three evolving colors of dyed molds. On the other, the deliberately cold, just-the-facts presentation, linked to its scientific referent, makes it hard to say that the interaction of the three screens adds up to a larger, coordinated whole, or is simply three screens running side-by-side.

Gesturing to science may reflect a kind of artistic identity crisis: the need to claim a sense of purpose that, say, a pattern of colors doesn't have. The thing is, what insight art has into scientific processes is by definition secondary, leaving such objects in a weird limbo. Philip Ross' cool *Juniors* plays directly with this sense. It consists of a display of five identical glass units in a cluster on the wall, each one featuring a small plant suspended in a cylinder of water, a LED light beaming in at the top, while a tube in the water

connected to a small apparatus releases a tiny burst of bubbles at intervals, giving the plantlets just enough nutrients to survive, and thus maintaining them in a permanently stunted state for the viewer.

Ross is explicitly playing on an obsolescent "cabinet of curiosities" kind of vibe, making an end-run around the more contemporary specialization of art and science. The stunted plants, suspended like the pod-people in *The Matrix*, end up as an allegory for art in its relation to science -- the way art takes an alien body of knowledge as reference, but is not actually able to develop it.

The exoticized approach to technology that underlies artistic riffing on the subject becomes still clearer in the works by San Jose art collective C5, which, like Wight's piece, gesture vaguely towards the form of a triptych. Each of C5's photographic pieces center on a long, panoramic horizontal image of a landscape -- a view of mountains over fields, or a dense wooded area -- juxtaposed with two smaller photos beneath them: a blocky, primitive computer rendering of the terrain and a satellite map, complete with GPS coordinates.

What the piece is nominally "about" is the practice of geocaching, a popular pastime in which folks can go hunting for small hidden treasures via GPS coordinates. C5 asked geocaching aficionados about the most "sublime" spots they had visited, then sent a member on a cross-country motorcycle odyssey to photograph them in person. The function of the work's techie component is clear: A relatively routine conceptual investigation of esthetic notions of landscape, in the vein of '70s projects by Martha Rosler or Dan Graham, is given some zippy, hotwired

energy by bringing in the geeky pastime (then again, as every geocacher knows, the "treasures" hidden are purposely worthless, so maybe the understated payoff of this epic project can be thematized.)

Elsewhere, Stephen Vitiello and the collective Futurefarmers both produce artworks meant to illustrate hybrid combinations of nature and technology. Futurefarmers' *Photosynthesis Robot* consists of two potted plants attached to a set of wheels, the assumption being that the plants' infinitesimal straining towards the sun will power the vehicle (shouldn't it be *Phototropism Robot*, then?) Meant as some kind of comment on the need for earth-friendly technology, it ends up showing how making art a commentary on technology can end up reducing it to pure information -- that is, to a one-liner.

Vitiello's work, meanwhile, falls the other way. The artist -- known for his recording of the wind groaning inside the World Trade Center, made famous post-9/11 -- covers one wall with a large potted vine, tiny speakers hidden among its branches playing a weird, ambient soundtrack. Listening closer, one can pick out that the composition actually splices together the accidentally recorded conversation between George Bush and Tony Blair, famously picked up by live microphones last summer as the two men stood by Israel's war on Lebanon (complete with Bush's meat-headed solution for the situation, delivered through a mouthful of food: "What they need to do is to get Syria to stop doing that shit.") The sound composition, replete with tinny, paranoid clicks, has a beautifully creepy texture, though its role in addressing environmental or technological issues seems relatively superficial in comparison (something about

microphones in the bushes?)

All told, analyzed this way, what "Networked Nature" does is subtly trace how the explicit "issue" addressed by this vein of art -- technology vs. nature -- is a kind of lure to deflect from the deeper opposition -- technology vs. art itself. It's straight out of the psychoanalytic playbook: the overt, external conflict that elicits a flood of eager testimony is a stand-in for a more intractable, internal conflict. That is, the problem of how to make an arresting art object in an age of technological distraction is the real unspoken -- and traumatic -- question at play here, with pseudo-scientific posturing serving as a kind of intellectual defense that both reflects and deflects it.

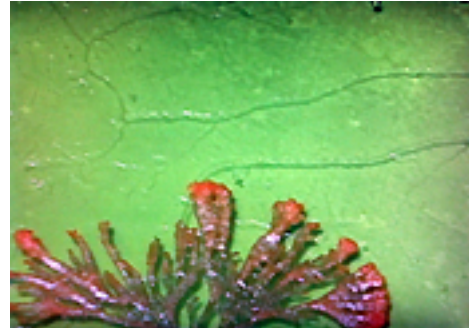
Perhaps for this reason, the final and strongest piece in "Networked Nature," hanging like a giant centerpiece from the ceiling of the gallery, seems literally to float above the nature/science theme entirely. SVA-trained artist Shih Chieh Huang's *EX-S-S-TW* -- also featured in the artists show at Virgil de Voldère gallery last year, as well as serving as anchor of the gallery's Pulse New York booth in 2006 -- is a starfish-like form hung from the ceiling, its body a mass of wires, lights and bottles filled with green liquids, arms made from clear plastic tubes that constantly breath in and out, inflating and deflating.

While evoking some kind of DIY esthetic of recycling, it fits rather beautifully and unashamedly into a long line of kinetic sculpture's useless machines. In a show about nature and technology, it does what comes to art most naturally.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.



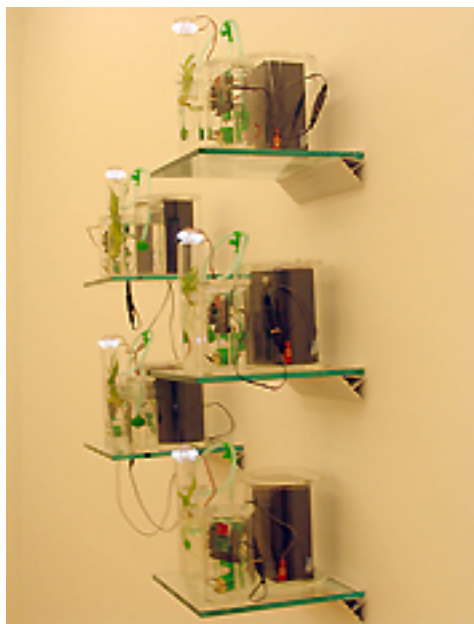
Installation view of "Networked Nature" at Foxy Production



Gail Wright
Creep (detail)
2004
Foxy Production



Gail Wright
Creep
2004
Foxy Production



Philip Ross
Juniors
2006
Foxy Production



Future Farmers
Photosynthesis Robot
2002
Foxy Production



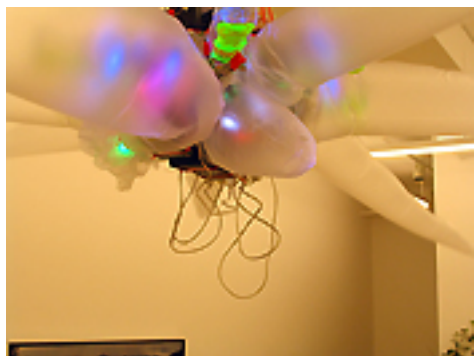
C5
Perfect View, N 31° 04.382 W 091° 31.466
(Mississippi)
2002-2005
Foxy Production



C5
Perfect View, N 44° 25.528 W 073° 40.109 (New York)
2002-2005
Foxy Production



Stephen Vitiello
Hedera (B,B,B,)
2006
Foxy Production



Shieh-Chieh Huang
EX-S-S-TW
2006
Foxy Production



Shieh-Chieh Huang
EX-S-S-TW
2006
Foxy Production