

The Personality of the Machine

Introductory essay for an Exhibition

Cheney Cowles Museum,

Spokane, WA
February 14, 1985

Jack Dollhausen has long been a legend in the Palouse. He has lived and worked quietly in Pullman, Washington for a number of years. Through his teaching career at Washington State University he has inspired numerous students to continue a search for artistic development. In addition to this, however, Jack Dollhausen is an extraordinary artist with a genius for electronic manipulation. He "paints" with lights and "draws" with multi-layered and colored wires. He works at an easel with his art materials close at hand... all coming out of hundreds of compartmentalized drawers and shelves. His studio resembles a ham radio operator's shack, but there is a totally different sense about the space. It does not speak so much about electronics as it does about Jack's creative energy.

The work of Jack Dollhausen does not consciously deal with the methodology of electronics. When discussing his work Jack prefers not to deal with questions of "how to". The discussion of his electronic circuitry is no more interesting to Jack than a conversation about paint brands would be to a painter.

The circuitry of wires, computer chips, lights, and sounds are only a means to an end. The end is Jack's need for romantic expression. The machines do seem to have a soul because the artist has infused the work with his personal delight in the unpredictable. The viewer is caught up in the machine's personality once he has removed himself from concern about the mysterious technical elements.

In 1978 I worked in a gallery where Jack Dollhausen had a one-person exhibition. Each morning before the gallery opened to the public I walked through the gallery plugging in the electrical cords which provided life to each of Jack's works. One at a time these machines came to life, responding to my presence with different sounds and flashing lights. After a month of this daily process these machines became my "friends." Their varying responses became second nature to me in the early morning hours of their "reawakening." The sounds they made continued through the day, filtering through the galleries and down the hall to the staff offices. As literally thousands of viewers streamed through the exhibition during one month's duration, the machines totally interjected themselves into the consciousness of the members of the gallery staff. Then the show ended and the work left the gallery. There was a genuine emptiness that remained. For months afterward sounds from the street outside sometimes resembled the sounds emitted by the exhibition and our consciousness was snapped back to that wonderful month when we shared Jack's "family of machines."

The pleasure I feel in showing the work of Jack Dollhausen in Spokane is very much the same as the warmth I feel when anticipating a long-awaited reunion with a dear friend.

--Beth Sellars, Curator of Art

Artweek, March 9, 1985

The Responsive Machine

Esu is a West African demon who engages in annoying but not dangerous activities, such as breaking your shoelaces. Jack Dollhausen has named one of his electronic sculptures Esu, and appropriately so. From Silicon Valley perspectives, Dollhausen is an Esu of electronics, serendipitously disrupting the rational functioning of electronic circuitry to celebrate the irrational world of sensory experience.

Dollhausen's sculptures, currently on view in a major exhibition at Cheney Cowles Museum, look at first glance like cantankerous light fixtures. Tapestry has six light bulbs on long arms that reach out like tentacles from an irregularly shaped board on which a network of wires and integrated circuits create a lyrical drawing. That's what you see, but that's only the beginning of the story. Without a viewer, Tapestry shuts down; even though the circuitry is on, there is no sound and no light. It is like a tense, immobile animal alive to its prey. When a person approaches the piece (most dramatically in the dark), the movement activates the lights and Tapestry begins to bark in many voices, make a machinelike whirring noise and light up in a flashing pattern. Each new movement causes the lights to flash at different speeds or sequences. Even though movement appears to control Tapestry by activating and altering it, the piece's light and sound have a life of their own. Our actions cannot be directly correlated to a particular event in the piece. Each of Dollhausen's sculptures has a unique style and personality of its own, created by the programs of the electronic circuits. Totally subverting the predictable functions of electronics, Dollhausen's circuits behave more as if they were notes in a symphony. Some fugue like cycles of the electronic components last for a long time. Pin Up, another piece that might be mistaken for a collection of gooseneck lamps, has a long complicated pattern that takes thirty days to complete. It responds to sound, rather than movement, though sound does not actually activate it. Instead sound makes its ongoing cycle visible in the flickering bulbs and can alter the pattern in an unpredictable way.

Dollhausen's pieces are sometimes naturalistic and intensely romantic in their references. Frog Pond (1976) imitates the sounds of a summer evening. It chirps and croaks when left alone. When you wave a hand in front of it, the sounds stop – as if a stone had been thrown into the pond among the frogs. Lights flicker across the central section of the piece like fireflies. Another example of naturalism is Butterfly. A more elemental piece with an esthetically attractive arrangement of circuits and lights, it is usually, but not always, activated by a simple sound, such as snapping, slapping or kissing. Just to See It Work is the only piece that uses mechanical movement and real words. It is activated by a short sound that triggers the rhythmic swinging of a pole with a light on it. Over a period of time, the light actually spells out the words "just to see it work." The message is also written on the bottom of the piece. The work is flatly clear in an absurd way, leading us into itself only to reveal a meaningless idea. Alone among the pieces, it arouses irritation with

its literalness, an irritation similar to that of a broken shoelace. Another new[jack@localhost ~]\$ sudo dnf upgrade -y

work, *Two Waves*, uses a gestural painted line that undulates below lines of lights that flicker in 256 patterns. The use of circuitry in both of these works relates them to earlier pieces, but the work now enters more obviously into the traditional art world.

My favorite piece is *Lovesong*. Most removed from naturalistic references and traditional aesthetics, *Lovesong*'s subject is, with little metaphor, the invisible energy that is the essence of life. Motionless, the piece makes a windlike noise; a viewer movement alters the pattern and triggers sound at a constantly changing point in the cycle. The piece responds to ambient light by increasing the intensity of its own illumination. Less specific than *Butterfly*, less arty than *Two Waves*, *Lovesong* embodies the intangible character of love itself as an exchange between two animate beings, accepting many variables that increase or decrease its intensity in an unpredictable way.

For twenty years Dollhausen has choreographed machine movements. At first he created objects in the style of the monstrous and amusing *Homemade*, ludicrously overbuilt light sculpture that is activated by a full 120 volts of electricity. Today, Dollhausen, uses only five or six volts to create his elaborate circuits. The present works combine an expansive use of time and interactive intimacy. Playful aspects of that interaction can be mistaken for superficial trivia, but in their attention to the interactions of time and energy, Dollhausen's works are anything but trivial.

In this age of nuclear threat, Dollhausen's sculpture with its celebration of the sensual energy of life. suggests an alternative to the use of energy for destruction. He is a trickster with electronic circuits like the demon Esu but his conversion of the normal functions of electricity into ornate statements of musical complexity has resulted in one of the most original art forms I have seen in recent years.

-- Susan Platt; Spokane

Sculpture Magazine, May, 1991

WASHINGTON

Jack Dollhausen at Linda Hodges Gallery, Seattle

The gallery was dimly lit, all the better to display Jack Dollhausen's light sound-, motion- and temperature-activated sculptures. Though for years he has lived only a few hundred miles away in Pullman, this recent exhibition was his first in Seattle.

Introduced to Billy Kluver of Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) while still a student at Wisconsin State University, Dollhausen has been inspired by the 60s E.A.T. movement ever since. The author of papers on portable digital computers, Popular Electronics articles and a spoof treatise (with sculptor Clayton Bailey) on "compression strength testing for classical ceramics," Dollhausen makes wall-mounted, plywood-based assemblages that are subtle, sensitive and clever. The Linda Hodges exhibition displayed eight sculptures that introduced Dollhausen as an artist who rightly deserves a place beside Seattle's own major technology artists, including Robert Teeple and Jonn Geise.

Sharing with Teeple the use of prepatterned light-emitting diode (LED) grids, Dollhausen eschews that artist's cold metallic materials in favor of funky wood, loopy, colored circuit wires and, in general, a witty analogy to painterly line, spatters and rectangular format that is instantly undermined by the works' moving, rumbling and occasionally talking presence.

Not really kinetic, works like Hummin' Stars (1989) and Too Close (1988) sacrifice visual strengths for viewer-activated sound and light patterns. In fact, Dollhausen's placement of wandering electrical cords and scrunched-up circuitry wires seems so offhand that any sense of formal clarity or monumental volume is ruthlessly avoided.

Instead, imagery is centered, frontal and expectedly straightforward, vaguely resembling a human head or body silhouette. The piece softly gurgles as the viewer stands before it, red light flashing on the diagonally placed squares or circles. Remarkably, a human presence – like a shy friend – is evoked, and the twilight gallery atmosphere reinforces the intimacy of the encounter. Max (1983) is a three-dimensional disordered face with one frosted and one clear lightbulb for eyes and a ring of red LED's for a mouth, all over a circular wooden "head."

An early work, A Midwest Summer Night's Dream (1980), seems a Picabia machine come to life, with a beautiful red-lacquer-stained glass jar containing ominous electrical equipment that is hooked up to red and black cords. When illuminated, the jar glows like a winter sunset.

Dollhausen's strength is his dad's - workshop aesthetic combined with affordable, accessible electronics. A kind of high-tech folk art, his sculptures are refreshing in their conceptual modesty, "good enough" craftsmanship and diminutive scale.

– Matthew Kangas, Seattle

Artweek, August 1995

Jack Dollhausen at Hoffman Gallery, Oregon School of Arts and Crafts

Back in the era before silicon chips, Jack Burnham argued in *Beyond Modern Sculpture* (1968) that sculpture represents a demi-urge and that anthropomorphic illusions have been superseded by pseudomachines that better approximate life. There's no more evident exponent of Burnham's theory today than Jack Dollhausen, Eastern Washington's electronic "circuiteer." His art is an extraordinary mix of electronic technology a funky aesthetic, the two coming together in loopy wall constructions that light up, blink, whoosh, sigh, rumble, and sometimes even speak.

The Hoffman Gallery exhibition introduced Portland viewers to the artist with seven plywood-based assemblages that comprised a survey of his work from 1982 to the present. Well before 1982, however, Dollhausen had developed a highly individual art form by combining the processes of art with the materials of electronic technology. Building his compositions from colorful hand-wired circuitry and readily available electronic parts, he produced works analogous in format to expressionistic paintings, with crowded, energetic surfaces and, most of all, the presence of the artist's hand. Unlike paintings, which remain static despite the most dynamic brushwork, the "brushwork" here resulted in works animated by the actual energy of seemingly random, spontaneous light and sound effects.

The earliest piece in this exhibition, *Walk Around the Pond* (1982), consists of incandescent light bulbs on long "stems" that sprout from the top of a curvilinear board. When a viewer comes near, a light show begins as the bulbs glow and fade intermittently, in no apparent order. As in all the works, this action is programmed and triggered by ultrasonic motion detectors. The most recent piece, *Fourth Dancer* (1995), is similarly configured, though more elaborate in its effects. The eleven lights are elongated - the type used in merchandise showcases - and placed on curved rods that extend gracefully from the edges of a black kidney-shaped, two-tiered support constructed of wire mesh above a plywood board. Attached to the mesh, a hodgepodge of tiny condensers, resistors, transistors, sensors and circuitry forma colorful "drawing" while revealing the technology that activates the sculpture. The "dance" of the lights is accompanied by whooshing sounds that surge, change pitch and fade in a pattern all their own.

Without lights but with enough variation in sounds to ensure our attention, *Too Close* (1988) is activated by an ultrasonic detector that senses the range of moving objects in the gallery up to a distance of eight feet. As the viewer approaches, the sculpture responds with vocalizations that resemble language. The patterns and quality of its speech vary, becoming clear only in the phrase "you are too close," when the viewer has come within a foot or two. Due to the sensitivity of the ultrasonics, however, the piece sometimes makes sounds when no one is near, as if it's working on its language. Among the many applications of electronic technology in contemporary art, Dollhausen's work is important because it humanizes a complex, impersonal technology. At times, it may appear to the viewer as something of a gimmick, but it also is an affirmation of an ingenuity that is uniquely human.

--Lois Allan writes about art in the Northwest, and is a contributing editor to Artweek.

They Long to be close to you

When you take a good look at these sculptures they notice back - and tell you so electronically

If we could peel all the layers of pretense from people's faces the politeness and hip, cunning, cuteness and self-protection in general - to really look at what's going on underneath, what we'd see might be something like Jack Dollhausen's electronic sculptures. All their circuits are showing. Filigrees of wire and light, the wall-hung pieces seem like vulnerable little creatures with their workings so exposed. And the place where they are on display - a lofty expansive room at George Suyama's architectural firm - suits them perfectly. All its innards are exposed too: the craggy subflooring rugged beams and rafters, bare heating ducts, with natural light sifting down from skylights.

Independent curator Beth Sellars, who has mounted shows at Suyama's in the past, now has charge of this cathedral-like space and will be installing regular exhibits. Dollhausen is a Pullman artist and professor at Washington State University and, like Eastern Washington painter Robert Helm, shows more frequently in Berlin than in Seattle. Don't miss the chance to see what happens when this eccentric artist breeds technology with poetry.

There are only five pieces in the room and each has its own personality. They hug the walls and wait like uncertain partygoers for you to make the first move. When you approach, they start emoting. The most assertive of the group started humming and bonking a sort of electronic catcall as soon as I walked over. With big hornlike speakers sticking out and all the subtlety of Steve Martin in multiple plaids doing his "wild and crazy guy" routine, it winked and flashed and postured. Hey I thought -- this thing really likes me. According to Dollhausen's technical descriptions, this party animal (whose title, ironically, is "Grace") operates by using an ultrasonic range finder so it can respond to your proximity and movement with its own internally generated noises. It also has a built-in clock that marks each hour by inventing a new sound. Of the five works in this show, "Grace" was the only one that struck me as being goofy, albeit in an adorable sort of way. The others are fragile, gorgeous and likewise highly suggestive.

"August" looks like a flighty, nervous cerebrum shown in profile a light-storm of thoughts hatching and scattering. When a viewer draws near, this machine reacts using an infrared detector that registers body temperature.

Then there's the great big, luminous "Fourth Dancer," a graceful paisley shape haloed in brilliant tubelights, which likes to have you stand close by. It sighs and strobos and whirs ecstatically, its heart all aflutter. This piece operates with an ultrasonic range finder with a range of about 10 feet. When no one is within that distance, the machine shuts off and reprograms its next light show.

"Downwindblue" looks like something fallen from the night sky, a cross between a star and the crescent moon, blinking shyly.

Dollhausen's notes explain that the random intervals for the lights and sounds are obtained using a Geiger counter. He uses a similar apparatus for "Downwindsong," an exotic firefly of welded steel and electronic circuitry. The "downwind" part of the titles refers to living near Hanford, and it puns on the fact that these pieces are activated by ionizing radiation.

I spent quite a while looking at the exhibit, my consciousness tweaked, like a Geiger counter, in a way

that signals a brush with the real thing. Walking across the room to leave, I noticed that the room seemed a little warmer than it had earlier. I caught a whiff of hot wires and warm light bulbs and thought how nice it is to make such an impression. Especially when it's mutual.

--Sheila Farr - Special to the Seattle Times, 1/26/98

Dollhausen's new circuits make great connections

Thirty years ago, HAL the computer met his much-deserved demise. The surviving crewman of "2001: A Space Odyssey" rendered him harmless by erasing his memory, layer by intricate layer.

Intelligent machines are up to no good in the movies. Even at their most sympathetic the escaped replicants in Ridley Scott's 1982 "Blade Runner" - they'll kill you soon as look at you.

In art, they're rare. The most prominent are what might be called suicidal combustibles, produced in elegant form by Jean Tinguely in the 1950s and with bombastic flamboyance for orgasmic performances by Survival Research Laboratories in the 1980s. Eastern Washington sculptor Jack Dollhausen is a deliberate step down from that kind of drama. He makes machines that simulate consciousness but pose no threat to themselves or others. He isn't mining the mother lode of sci-fi horror, he's creating a kind of mirror with a sensory range, using welded steel, electronic circuitry, baling wire, Geiger counters, infrared detectors.

His sculptures are mirrors in the sense that dogs are, reacting to the mood of the dominant figure. If they resemble pets, his new sculptures resemble elderly ones, content to sleep through their days when undisturbed yet capable of making valiant efforts to show appreciation.

However dimly, these sculptures respond to viewers. Hence the title of the show crated by Beth Sellers and on view at George Suyama Architects Gallery Space: "Your Presence Is Detected." Anyone familiar with Dollhausen's earlier efforts will be surprised by his new work. As a maker, he has always been of the handyman school, enjoying the poetics of the forcefully crude, a style favored in the Northwest by the likes of Buster Simpson and the late Ed Kienholz.

Dollhausen was never quite on their level. His rough and tumble circuit boards, siren sounds and bare bulbs were often painful without being powerful.

Polish can ruin an artist of this type, but in his case the reverse proved true. Polish made him. These five sculptures hanging on the walls are refined in a new way - quieter, subtler and more fluid.

"Fourth Dancer" from 1995 (48 inches high, 59 inches wide, 11 inches deep) is an inverted comma that lights up and flashes when approached. The welded steel is lush, even organic, as if instead of being fired into shape it grew into its present maturity. The same is true for the other sculptures in the room, especially "Grace" from 1996, 29 inches high by 43 inches wide and 10 inches deep. "Grace" flares open along its circuits and seems to be searching for a way to applaud.

Dollhausen created his first responsive sculpture more than 30 years ago, building a machine that would light a 100-watt bulb when it heard a sound.

Called "Zinger," it worked pretty well except in warm weather, when its response was muffled. The person who bought it in 1966 described the variation as soul, but a scientist friend of the artist insisted it was nothing more than bad design.

With deadpan humor, Dollhausen says he has tried to work in the gap between soul and bad design ever since. However these terms were originally used, today they represent positives that have fused.

One thing is constant. Nothing is disguised. Every cord and circuit connective every socket for every light, is visible. With all his cards on the table, Dollhausen manages to deal winning hands, time after time.

--Regina Hackett -Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Friday,December 4, 1998

DOLLHAUSEN'S GIZMOS ARE WIRED TO GET A RESPONSE

Jack Dollhausen's sculptures are no wallflowers. Come-hither, they tease; sign up on my dance card. Without a speck of guilt, they make goo-goo eyes at all comers. They lure you into their personal space, transform you into a maestro of call and response. You move, they wink. You speak, they sing. Without you, they are ministers speaking to empty pews; women of the night courting deserted streets. The antithesis of hermits, they rely on feedback. Consider them interactive souls, sensitive New Age folk.

Now, wait a minute. Aren't these inanimate sculptures? Piles of wood, metal, circuitry and lights strung up on the Tacoma Art Museum's walls? At first glance, yes. But somehow each flaunts personality and humor. One even warns, "You are too close" ("Too Close," 1988).

"Grace," whose abstract plump body sports two ears that speak, shows off shamelessly. Brazenly, she chimes on the hour and in-between, any time you ask. She's one smart chick, scoring regurgitated refrains while tantalizing suitors with her infinite variations of chimes.

Similar random programming reigns in "Midwest Summer Night's Dream (Bug Jar)" (1977). Flickering red lights dash chaotically inside, speeding and slowing to human voices and touch. For Dollhausen it pays homage to glorious childhood memories of Wisconsin's fireflies.

"Minor Nation (Frog Pond)" (1977) does the reverse, protectively shutting down its croaky frog and chirpy cricket chorus as viewers sidle up to its eerie green glass pool. As Dollhausen explains, "Nature doesn't make any moves that don't work."

No two of Dollhausen's 26 "machines" in this "A 30 Year Start" exhibit act the same; no actions recycle exactly. Sounds and lights rumba wantonly, evolving trickily just as you gloat over their secret patterns. The complexity defies imagination, blindsides the bell-curve's predictability, embraces Dollhausen's passion for chaos and disorder.

Like a silver-tongued politician, he turns principles inside out. Contradictions abound. Instead of seeking life in another universe, his creatures tap their immediate surroundings. Instead of replaying tunes, his machines invent songs. Instead of the repeating motorized works of kinetic art's early proponent, France's Jean Tinguely, Dollhausen's feedback systems produce constant surprises. And while Alexander Calder's mobiles depend on air currents, Dollhausen's depend on sound and motion detectors.

Laden by circuit boards, Geiger counters, computer chips and LEDs (Light Emitting Diodes), Dollhausen's machines are cats lying in wait, alert and ready to pounce. When approached, they pulsate like boiling water, firing up glowing lights and wacky noises, as if a mad scientist startled. Dollhausen disdains the passive "look, move on, look" mentality of art exhibits. He opts for fluid interactions that require your input and time. After all, these pieces are not mounted fish; they're quivering trout, bait luring you into a game of catch and release. His choreography of them and us reflects his own revved-up, rarely ready to rest personality.

Between his incorrigible tinkering and exhibits, mostly in a German gallery, he teaches sculpture at Washington State University in Pullman, a job he's held for 30 years. Though Dollhausen claims to hate theorizing about his art, when asked a question he spouts off as if he's just discovered the Northwest Passage. Listening feels voyeuristic, as if peeking at synapses mating in his mind.

Once procreated and born, Dollhausen's gizmos are hardly soft and cuddly. They deal in binary math, electromagnetic radiation, light, poetry and black magic, not exactly touchy-feely stuff. In fact, they spill their guts in elaborate bounties of wire, transformers and lights, somehow becoming personable pals who enchant, amuse and mystify.

Some, as "Downwindblue," (1998) allude to social consciousness, to the biologic dangers of nuclear tainted winds blowing into the Palouse from the Hanford Reservation. "August," (1998) a flowerlike array of steel, baling wire, infrared sensors and circuits, seems a play on Eastern Washington's hot summers and radiation dustings. Responding to body heat, it splatters chartreuse, powder blue and rosy-mauve, unnatural hues of tainted summer skies.

"Maxine," (1996) a vibrating bouquet of wheatlike stalks, lays delicate shadows against a wall bathed in sunny yellow rays. Is this a play on "America the Beautiful's" amber waves of grains? A commentary from a counter-culture ponytailed artist shunned by Pullman's locals 30 years ago? Read what you want, Dollhausen would say. We'll never know and it doesn't matter. These machines become our friends.

But don't get too attached. Instead of instructions, they come with a tough-love tag, a guarantee only for Dollhausen's lifetime. As in nature, there are no extended warranties. You've got to dance while the music plays.

-- Judy Wagonfeld
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Dollhausen wires his sculptures to whisper, blush, blink, sigh

I lean in close, my ear an intimate couple of inches from a foggy tangle of wires and lights, and a sexy hum starts up. Then, a sweet birdlike language of longing, plaintive and dear, whispers against my cheek. The fellow who's singing is sort of your homely Cyrano type, but with this poetry going on, who cares about looks?

"Lovesong," built in 1982, is one of the more primitive pieces in "Jack Dollhausen: A 30-Year Start," a retrospective curated at the Boise Museum of Art and now on tour, but it's still got all the charm it needs. The framed wood panel, brushed with a blur of white and gray paint and strung with lights and circuitry, emits sound when some kind of proximity detector is activated. To my mind, it's a masculine voice, but to someone else it might come across as distinctly female. A Jungian would no doubt dub the sculpture an ideal lover: a virtual blank screen for our projections. It's lucky for me, when I walk in, to be the only visitor, so I can bask in the full glow of its affection.

Alright, I know: Electronic sculptures don't really have feelings. But Dollhausen the Eastern Washington art wizard who makes them imbues his plugged-in wire and circuitry artworks with all kinds of ways of reacting to human company. They have the kind of sensitivity and responsiveness blushing, blinking, murmuring, sighing, lighting up and then suddenly shutting down that, in a human, allows us to measure the way they feel about us. In the presence of a Dollhausen sculpture, it's easy to anthropomorphize.

Things were pretty low-tech when the artist got started making this stuff back in the 1960s. The earliest piece in the show, called "Prototype" and built in 1968, looks like something Joseph Cornell might have assembled if he'd been into old radio parts instead of ballerinas and birds a slightly surreal abstract composition done without paint. But Dollhausen doesn't stop with composition. "Prototype," he says in the wall text, "responds to ambient light and is active in twilight flashing two fluorescent tubes in a chaotic duet." For our viewing safety, the artist enclosed the thing in glass. That's because if you were to stick your finger in to prod it, you could end up dead. It's powered by lethal voltages.

A lot has changed in the world of electronics since then, and Dollhausen's art has grown more refined as well. Instead of funky assemblages, his sculptures have evolved into sophisticated compositions of sound, light, line, pattern, color, warmth and wit.

"Downwindsong" is a lightning bug with sparkly antennae; "A Walk Around the Pond" resembles a melting guitar with goosenecking light sockets in place of a neck. (Dollhausen used to make guitars and his organic instrumentlike forms predate the Hendrix-inspired mania of EMP.)

For those of us more attuned to body language than electronic gadgetry, the way these things work will likely remain a mystery. Dollhausen trained as an engineer and graduated with one degree in math and another in fine art. That enables him to work with an artist's array of tools, including composition, color, symbolism and chiaroscuro, and also incorporate infrared sensors, Geiger counters and such things as pseudo-random sequence generators and two-channel sound-generating circuitry.

Whatever. All I know is the assemblages are not only viewer-friendly, they're quite blatant about it. The visible circuitry makes Dollhausen's creations appear rather exposed and vulnerable. Especially since

the more recent pieces have gotten rid of the clunky wood panels and frames, and become fragile, almost otherworldly. They also have stopped resembling pictures and become more sculptural, even though they still hang on the wall, basically two-dimensional and intended for frontal viewing. Anyone feeling a little excluded by contemporary art, a little put off by exhibitions that require a lot of information in order to appreciate them, should head down to Tacoma Art Museum and introduce yourself to Dollhausen's work. It's guaranteed to be welcoming and it's definitely a good place to take the kids. They'll be enthralled. (And they may know more about how all that electronic gadgetry works than you do.)

By Sheila Farr
Seattle Times art critic
June 7, 2002

Electric Dreams

In the galleries at the MAC where artist Jack Dollhausen's work is on display, a girl about 10 years old, in shorts and a T-shirt, stops in front of one of the pieces. Her feet are planted in the circle of light being cast from the ceiling encompassing only her and the abstract artwork hanging on the wall. Tilting her head quizzically, her long, straight brown hair brushes over her right shoulder. The artwork, a large dome of black glass surrounded by wires and circuit boards, blinks green lights back at her. Then the girl starts jumping up and down. For about 15 seconds she continues, her hair flying around her head, her heels slapping against the soles of her sandals. Finally, stopping, she says, "Neat," and moves to another piece.

All around the exhibit, which is entitled "A 30-Year Start," similar things are happening. A young man stands staring intently at a grid of LED lights, holding his hand up between himself and the piece, snapping his fingers as symmetrical patterns flow across the framework of lights. An older couple leans toward a bank of multi-colored wires and suspended lights, making cat sounds and repeating the word "hello." And all of this activity seems to delight the artist, whose tall frame and broad moustache suggest an old-world cowboy more than an internationally respected visual artist.

Jack Dollhausen lives in the Palouse and teaches at WSU. He lists his 1969 FCC First-Class Radio-Telephone Operator's License right next to his membership with the local steelworker's union on his artist's profile. (He is a journeyman sheetmetal mechanic.) It all matches his voice, which is soft and steady as he politely nods his head. "I think of myself as a kind of a gleaner, in a way," he says smiling. "Following this big huge truck of machinery and technology, and picking up things that fall off the truck and making stuff out of it."

Despite the humble exterior, however, Dollhausen is someone firmly rooted in technology's present moment, building the latest flash microchips into his works of art. He creates elaborate, visually intricate machines that respond subtly to radiation in the environment. And he has a love of technology -- every wire and resistor that makes it happen -- that leads him to keep the machinery of his machines on full view. At a distance, what appear on one piece to be spindly scribbles, on closer viewing become dozens of loops and whorls of wire.

"A computer to me is a bunch of bits," he states. "And I don't have any preconceptions about it, except that it's flipping switches and electricity is running through it. I start from there, and I put them together. Even though they use electronic technology, I put my machines together very much like a painter puts paint together. It's an opportunistic, digressive activity, and that's why I do it -- because of the process of doing it. I don't think that the method is much different than picking up clay."

With electronic circuitry as an essential part of his chosen artistic medium, however, Dollhausen makes something much more compelling than a merely functional device. "Electronic circuitry can count really well," he explains. "It's designed to do that. But if you know the difference between counting and dancing, well, I want to make it dance."

Dollhausen says that when he first started building his machines, he had to put them in boxes to protect viewers from the lethal voltages he was using. But after figuring out how to make safer machines, he became interested in revealing not only the underlying electronics of the pieces, but in using the opportunity to illustrate what it looks like to mentally conceive of one of his pieces.

"I think of it as switches flipping and electrons moving around, and I think my work looks like my pictures of those things happening. In other words, the work looks like the idea that develops as I build it."

Looking at one of Dollhausen's works, watching the electricity flow through the machine, illuminating lights and almost palpably coursing through wires, you're drawn in even closer. Although the pieces make sense as machines, it's almost irresistible to see the rat's nest of wiring as abstract art. And like many pieces of good abstract art, the works give the viewer a space on which to project their own imagination.

"I'm always surprised at what the viewer brings to it," Dollhausen chuckles. "Because even though they're abstract forms, they're functioning machines. And all the wires function. But they're also my line -- the line in the machine like the line in a drawing. And that drawing happens as I'm working on it. It doesn't come from a conception of it -- a clear vision that I have at first. It comes out of how something works."

With one of the pieces, as you lean in even more to see how it works, you can hear it make sounds: just a random smattering of clipped syllables and electronic guttural noises. Get close enough and the piece organizes itself quickly, stating, "You are too close!" It's very clear that Dollhausen's pieces interact with the viewer.

Every work of art changes when it's viewed. Even if the basic materials -- the paint, the metal, or the sounds -- don't change at all, two different viewers, when asked to describe the same work of art, will give different answers. Visitors bring their own history, emotional state, and particular location in space and time to the encounter, and the art adapts accordingly -- transforming differently for everyone. And it's that event -- the interaction between the work of art and the viewer -- that Jack Dollhausen shapes as much as the wires and resistors themselves. Without someone there to perceive it, the entire work of art doesn't happen.

"The idea of a tree falling in the wilderness," Dollhausen says, smiling. "Does it make a sound? No, it doesn't. It makes an acoustical vibration, but if there's no ear, there's no sound."

And so Dollhausen has designed his machines so that they turn themselves off if nobody is around to witness them. But when people are there, they change according to the viewer's movements, sounds and temperature. It's a phenomenon that MAC Curator of Art Jochen Wierich will enhance when he brings in a pair of local poets and a jazz ensemble to perform around the pieces on May 28.

"I don't even think a piece is finished without a viewer," Dollhausen adds.

As if to illustrate that point, one of his pieces, *Dancer 4*, responds with active light displays and sounds when viewers stand near it. But if one moves away to see some of the other pieces in the galleries, the lights grow to full intensity, and the sounds become a wail that only gradually fade away. The piece, it seems to be saying, needs the viewer. Many viewers walk back.

Dollhausen says that he only builds with the bits of technology that he has gleaned. But watching the movements and listening to the sounds from the museum visitors, it's clear that his machines are only one part of the art that he's making. Because every person in the room is dancing.

By Marty Demarest

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