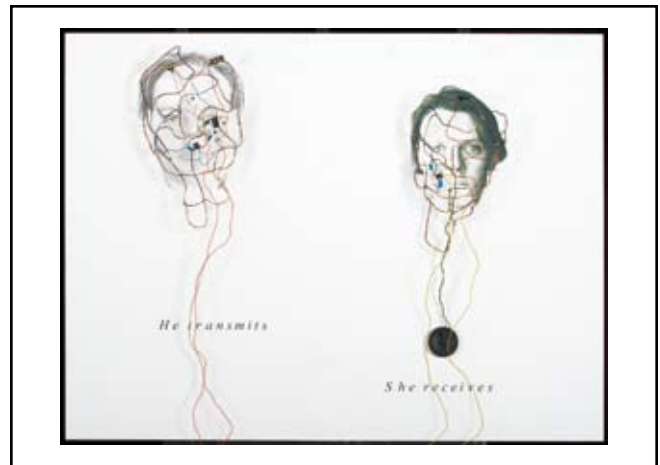


Diana Burgoyne
HE TRANSMITS / SHE RECEIVES

Diana Burgoyne:
Gesture and the Handmade
BY DANIEL JOLIFFE



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By Daniel Jolliffe, 2004

Introduction

In much of the twenty-first century world, we have developed both the understanding and the expectation that electronic technology comes only in sleek, predetermined packages. These devices come to us in multi-coloured and multiple configurations, with the dubious claim that they will enhance our communicative abilities. Most significant in this statement is that they “come to us”; the recipient of these technologies plays a very small role in determining how they are designed and implemented.

Diana Burgoyne
He transmits / She receives, 1990

mixed media sculpture
(77.2 x 101.3 x 14.5 cm)
SAG 1994.03.01

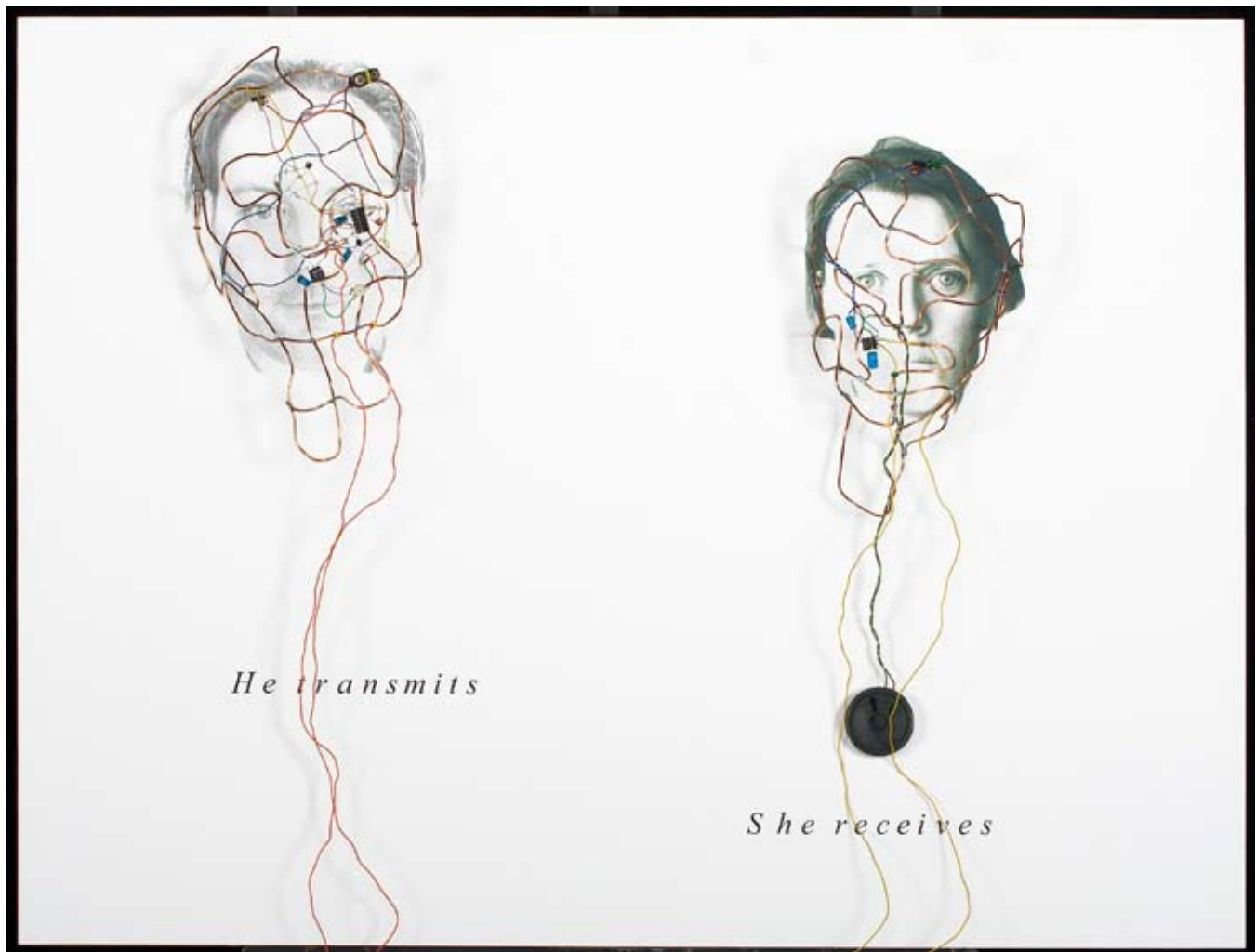
Photograph by Cameron Heryet

The result is that we are placed at the terminal end of a consumption cycle that has the possibility of profoundly altering the way we communicate, with its new methods, protocols, passwords and updates coming to us on a daily basis. It will therefore be something of a shock for most viewers of Diana Burgoyne's *He transmits/She receives* (1987) to discover that another kind of technological practice is possible, one whose focus is on the individual and the handmade. In her twenty-year practice, Diana Burgoyne has created a series of artworks that use

handmade sculpture, performance and electronic technologies to explore, in an embodied and personal way, how we communicate in a world saturated by electronic technologies.

Who is the artist?

Diana Burgoyne began her artistic career by studying sculpture, first in Canada at the University of Victoria, then in the United States at the University of California at Los Angeles. She was fortunate enough to study under several noted sculptors: Mowry Baden and



Diana Burgoyne *He transmits / She receives*, 1990 mixed media sculpture (77.2 x 101.3 x 14.5 cm) SAG 1994.03.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

Roland Brener on the northern side, and Charles Ray and Chris Burden on the southern side. Elements of each of their approaches can be seen in her work, be it in Mowry Baden's kinaesthetic awareness of the body, Brener's discipline in the formal construction of objects, Ray's canny sense of objects as they relate to the body, or Chris Burden's startling execution of the performative act. In this rich milieu of time-based sculptural practice, Burgoyne was able to develop a singularly unique practice that integrated sculpture with two unlikely bedfellows: component-level electronics and performance.

As her practice as an artist developed, Burgoyne became intrigued with the special qualities presented by electronic technologies. She recognized the metaphorical possibilities made possible by these technologies, in particular their ability to carry electrical representations of sound, light, or a performer's movements and gestures. Electronic circuits and control systems began to appear in her work, always in ways that enabled a performer's or viewer's participation. By joining these technologies to performance, her work became a unified triad of techniques: sculpture combined with electronic technologies, always presented in the context of the performer's or viewer's body.

The work that emerges from these interests relies on Burgoyne's innate sense of how the body perceives and relates to both the sculptural object and to technology. Among Canadian artists in the same vein (e.g. Victoria Scott and Ken Gregory), Burgoyne has created a singularly unique practice centred on the embodied experience of technology. Works from this oeuvre, such as *He transmits/She receives*, are reflections of a body of work devoted to a forceful and evocative examination to technology and its human effects.

What is the artist's work about?

Given the interdisciplinary nature of Burgoyne's practice, to describe it as simply sculpture, performance or electronic media does not adequately capture its breadth. Thematically, these components are means to a single end: the examination of the gesture of communication in a technologized world. In each of her works, it is the loss of the simple, unmediated bodily gesture that shines through brightest. Burgoyne expresses and explores this loss through her own series of gestures: the gesture of handmade sculpture, of handmade technology and of the body in performance.

At the foundation of this exploration are handmade sculptural objects that almost always show the trace of the user's body. Whether it is through a mask, a drawing, or the silhouette of her performance machines, Burgoyne's sculptures always incorporate either the performer's body or some other evidence of the body in their form.¹ These are not technological works that speak of machinery divorced from embodiment; rather, they draw their strength from their handmade construction and their close connection to the everyday gesture of the body.

In Burgoyne's practice, handmade electronics go hand-in-hand with the similarly created forms of her sculpture. The resulting fusion is a kind of technological sculpture with exposed circuitry, one that takes care not to conceal the process of technology. Rather than hide and streamline the electronics that make her pieces operate, we get instead a sincere exposure of the workings of the technological process. Like a traditionally sewn quilt, her electronic constructions make evident both the technology *and* the hand of the producer. This is a conscious choice, as it allows the possibility of intimacy between viewer and artist: the handmade circuitry itself is a kind of performance of

the personal, a private communication between artist and viewer that is a rejection of disembodiment.

The power of Burgoyne's work is lost if it is treated merely as a static object or a product of technological processes; to properly experience the work, one needs to see the technology in terms of its embodiment. An excellent example of the key role that this embodiment plays in Burgoyne's work is her piece *He transmits/She receives*, part of the Surrey Art Gallery's permanent collection.

The Significance Of *He transmits/She receives*

As an audience we are connected to this performance of communication through our bodies and our perception of Burgoyne's handmade masks, as are the performers. The electronics of the masks that we see and hear give technology an embodied place in communication: even with their cyborg-like qualities, we can look through the performer's masks to see the familiar features of the human face. The effect is that of a semi-transparent technological experience, where technology both amplifies and shows its role in human communication. Watching the performers of *He transmits/She receives*, we become part of a system where technology, sculpture and the body act to expose and make audible how technology changes human communication.

Critically, Burgoyne's strategy in *He transmits/She receives* can be seen to play both sides of the technological field. On one side, her work makes the claim that technology *can* play a role in communication that is transparent, personal and intimate. On the other, her work can be seen as a critique of how even simple technology has an alienating effect. But for those who experience her work first hand, the message in *He transmits/She receives* is definitively positive; the gesture of performance and the

handmade, so clearly integrated into her work, drives Burgoyne's message towards optimism. Embodied by the performer, the handmade technology of *He transmits/She receives* speak a personal, even intimate, alternative to our normal experience of technology.

Conclusion

In *He transmits/She receives*, Diana Burgoyne merges the body, technology and handmade sculpture in order to amplify and explore how our own gestures towards communication have changed in a technologized world. Her practice over the past twenty years can be seen as an act towards bringing embodiment back to technological practice, reinvigorating the important gestures that were lost when we embraced technology so readily: the gesture of the handmade, of body language or of unmediated communication. The artist herself best expresses the complexity of this project, when she says her desire is to explore "the relationship between the body, technology and communication and how those three things keep intertwining with each other."²

Footnotes:

1 See *Hanging One and Hanging Two*, both documented on the artist's web site <http://www.eciad.bc.ca/~dburg/main.htm>, accessed August, 2006.

2 All quotes are from a telephone interview with the artist, Sept 6, 2004 between Chatham, Ontario and Vancouver, British Columbia.

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