

with the collaborative support of Prem Makeig and Grégoire Paultre as well as Ronnie Bass

An introduction

Noah Fischer's sculpture and image-making involves manipulating fire and light. He has an artist's talent for drawing and a mechanic's talent for making materials perform. At various points he has crossed the lines that isolate sculptures and photographers, photographers and painters, painters and set designers, designer and video film maker.

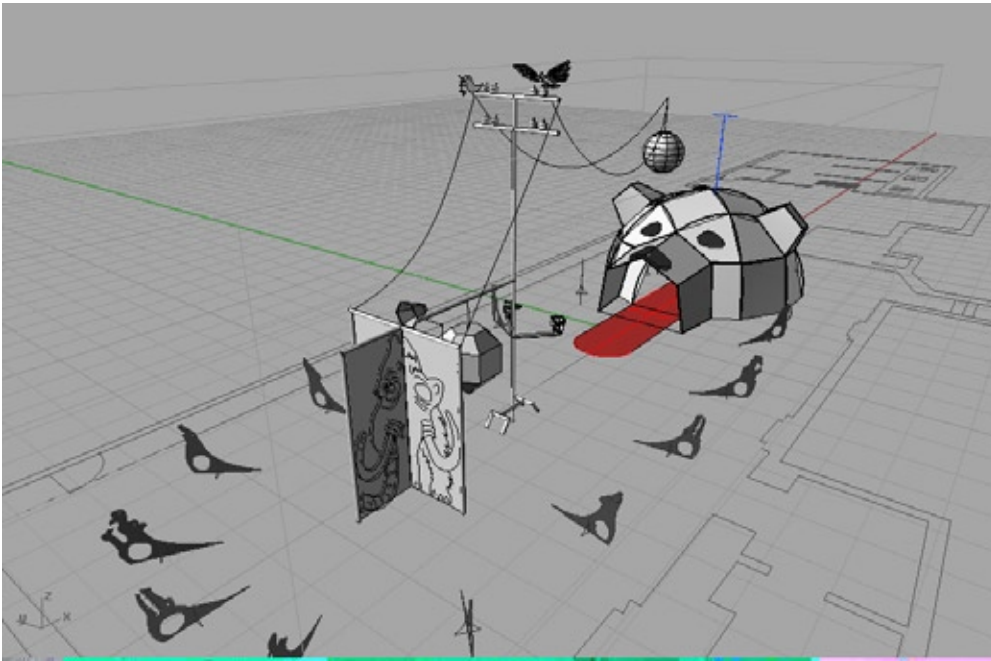
In early 2007, he created *Rhetoric Machine*, dramatic sculptural installation for two small rooms. In room one speeches by US presidents— Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, Johnson and Clinton — present the language and sounds of American warfare and pop music. In the second room, the great communicator and television host, Ronald Reagan, invokes godless Communism, the Christian bible and C.S. Lewis. In these small spaces, the audience is confronted with combinations of sound, motion and light. The result is an anti-media that pulls us behind the mesmerizing surface of the rhetoric.

The project that followed, *Pop Ark*, proved to be much larger and longer. Fischer is still playing with the material of verbal and visual rhetoric, and the subject is global warming. For the sound track, he mixes audio excerpts from Albert Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, a comedy routine by a very young Bill Cosby, and testimonies of environmental angst taken from less renowned contributions to YouTube (one identified as Murf). Whereas the smaller *Rhetoric Machine* was a solo effort, *Pop Ark* is a collaboration with Prem Makeig and Grégoire Paultre.

The images reproduced here include sketches by Fischer, computer models by Makeig for the entire installation, photos by Paultre of the work being produced at Fischer's studio in Brooklyn, New York, and my own photos of the installation as it was presented to the public May 9, 2008 at Kunst- en festival des arts, Brussels. At this venue, *Pop Ark* filled the enormous hall of Centrale électrique, while the enormous mask containing the timing drum that controlled all motion and light, known as the Gore-bot, sat in a storefront facing the street, attached to the ark by braided cables.

Paul Kahn





Pop Ark, Scene 1:

Source: *Bill Cosby Complete Noah Act*

There's a fellow by the name of Noah
 Built an ark. Everyone knows he built an ark said what did
 Noah do, well he built an ark but very few (cough) people
 know about the conversation that went on between the Lord
 and Noah. You see Noah was in his rec room sawing away,
 making a few things for the home there, he's a good carpen-
 ter.

Voopa Voopa Voopa
 (bell)

Noah

Somebody call?
 Voopa Voopa Voopa
 (bell)

Noah

Who is that?

It's the Lord, Noah

Right!
 Where are ya?
 Whaddy want. I've been good.

I want you to build an ark

Right!
 What's an ark?

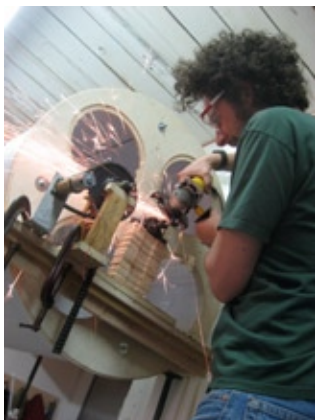
Well don't worry about that Noah, when you get that done go
 out in the world and collect all of the animals in the world by
 twos and put them in the ark.

Right!
 Who is this really?
 What's going on?
 How come you want me to do all of these weird things?

I'm going to destroy the world.

Right!
 Am I on candid camera?





Song: That's Me on the LCD

Guitar and vocals: Gregoire Paultre,

Vocals: Ronnie Bass, Noah Fischer

That's Me...On the LCD (x2)
 Blue Pixels all around, no Polar Bear to be found
 That's Me...On the LCD (x2)
 Melting Ice and Snow, as I upload video
 Who is that?
 That's Me...On the LCD (x2)
 (guitar solo)
 Baby Sunshine's bright, she wipes away the night
 That's Me...On the LCD (x2)

Al Gore, from *Inconvenient Truth*:

You see that Pale Blue dot? That's us. Everything that has ever happened in human history has happened on that pixel. All the triumphs, all the tragedies, all the wars, all the famines, all the major advances. It's our only home. And that....

Murf: is what is at stake.

Gore: is what is at stake.

Murf: I mean Our ability...

Gore: Our ability...

Murf: to live...

Gore: to live...

Murf: on planet earth.

Gore: on planet earth

Gore: To have a future as a civilization. I believe this is a moral issue, it is your time to seize this issue, it is our time to rise again to secure our future.

(Gong)



Pop Ark, Scene 2:

Right!

Don't turn back into a caveman people.

(Gong)

It's like chasing your tail talking about this subject.

Talking about...

It's like chasing your tail talking about this subject.

Whenever I talk about these individual concepts, each individual concept, they need their own individual arguments, and then even when I've broken down to conclusions....

It's like chasing your tail talking about this subject.

And I don't mean to infer that you're brainwashed...well...

Everyone is.

They create, they find this individual problem, this catastrophe thing...and they point out the way out of this problem that we're causing on ourselves. This danger threatens the world or America or all people or something. The media and the press are more than happy to exaggerate that image of danger.





Because the conclusions will always sound absurd to people who are brainwashed...
 And I don't mean to infer that you're brainwashed...well
 The environment is, the environment is what it is, it does not try to aspire to be something.
 You know...
 The world lies to you...Yeah everyone's gotta stop watching TV
 'Cause the conclusions will always sound absurd...
 The world lies to you
 Don't turn back into a caveman people.
 (Gong)

Duh! And it like totally eradicates Global Warming bullshit. Our World is crumbling right before our eyes and we're not doing anything about it and I want to be able to get proof of all we had before everything came crashing down like picture of...

The everyone's angry...

Song: Angry Song

Guitar and vocals: Gregoire Paultre

Angry at the blue pixel
 Angry at the world
 Angry at Polar Bears:
 I'm so angry, angry, angry
 So don't you burn the sunshine before it burns you down
 (x2)

And everyone's angry
 And everyone honks at me you know...saying that I'm giving them a bad day by driving too weird and it's like everyone's so angry nowadays and then the world is getting this angry vibe and it's like everyone just stop and breath!

(Gong)

Do some yoga
 Sit by yourself under a tree and think
 This world is going too fast and no-one takes the time to think anymore.

"Panorama" by Daniel Lanoise

performed on Pedal Steel



Al Gore from *Inconvenient Truth*:

And there was inevitably some suspense, then when they came back in radio contact, they looked up and they snapped this picture and it became known as "earthrise" and that one picture exploded in the consciousness of humankind. It led to dramatic changes. Within eighteen months of this picture, the modern environmental movement had begun.

The next picture was taken on the last of the Apollo missions, Apollo 17. This one was taken on December 11, 1972 and it is the most commonly published photograph in all of history. And it's the only picture of the earth from space that we have where the sun was directly behind the spacecraft (ha ha) so that the earth is fully lit up ... and not partly in darkness.

The next image I'm gonna show ya has almost never been seen. It was taken by a space craft called the Galileo that went out to explore the solar system and as it was leaving earth's gravity it turned its cameras around and took a time lapse picture of one day's worth of rotation here compressed into twenty-four seconds.

Isn't that beautiful





Song: Earth Picture

Guitar: Gregoire Paultre
Arrangement: Ronnie Bass
Vocals: Noah Fischer

Earth Picture, earth picture, Earth polar bear
Baby photograph, baby photograph take a photograph of
Polar Bear
See me sunshine, sunshine shine so brightly
Baby Sunshine, sunshine, earth picture
Polar Bear, polar bear polar bear
(Gong)

Bill Cosby: Noah?

What? Whaddya want?
(Gong)



It makes me sad to think of all the animals that we really
don't care about, that we let dies, like the polar bears and...

They said that most polar bears...don't hunt

What we've noticed is that in Antarctica there's ice shelves
melting, cracking off, going away, saying bye bye

Um, polar bears are dying because of it, because well, the ice
shelves are their homes and that's sad to think because I like
polar bears.

Song: Polar Bear

Guitar and vocals: Gregoire Paultre

And Polar bears are standing....
Because the ice shelves are melting, and the glaciers are
melting
On ice that's turning warm
And Polar bears are dying but kleiner Icebear's born...
Do you see that pale blue pixel?
Isn't that beautiful?

Global Warning first off...The thought of it is this Green-
house Effect, and I don't know if you've ever heard of this but
the Greenhouse Effect is then sun pretty much...
I'm doing weird hand gestures.



Song: Greenhouse

Arrangement and vocals: Noah Fischer

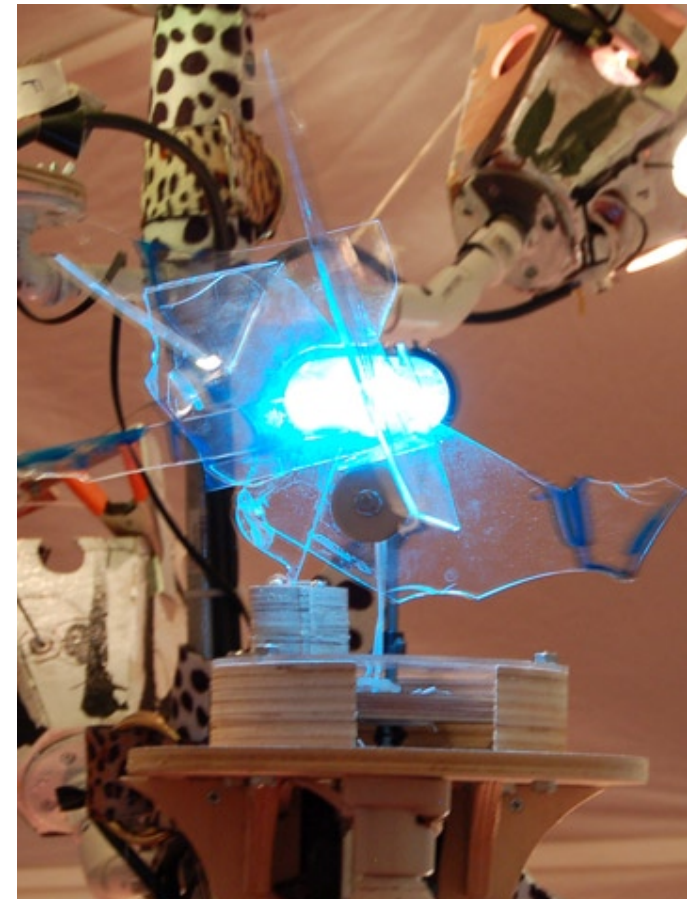
Come into my house my house, my green green house
baby sunshine.

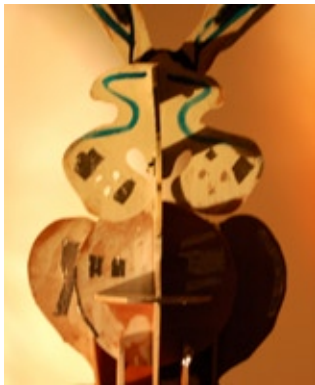
Murf: But the routine is, you know the UV rays
Come into my house my house, my green green house
baby sunshine.

Ok bye bye see you later, ok bye bye see you later
You know you're hot baby, and I need you to warm up this
house

The sun is our baby, like he's a baby sun right now
It's a green, green, green house. (x3)

And I don't think I've lied at all, I would never lie. This is my
open diary like I said but I feel like I've gained a lot of respect
and it's made me feel better about myself 'cause I know
maybe there aren't people in my school or nearby....





Song: Anthem

Arrangement and vocals: Ronnie Bass
Guitar: Gregoire Paulte

In the distance there's a shimmering light
It shines upon us, and breaks the night
We stir the sky this brings the light
As we continue our course in life

Beyond the stars is pale blue dot
It's what we have and all we got
We watch the triumph, we watch it grow
We see the rain, we see the snow

And it's our time to rise again
Against the sun, against the wind
And it's our time to fight the truth
For ourselves and for our youth

Don't turn back into a caveman people

I wanna be a wildlife photographer or a Zoologist.

So I basically love animals.

And I wanna do that because....

I want to be able to get proof of all we had before everything
came crashing down like pictures of....

Bengal Tigers Polar Bears...or... Pandas

Bill Cosby: Voopa Voopa Voppa

Noah
Voopa Voopa Voopa Voopa
Noah
Who is that?

The sun

Right!

The sun is our baby.

Right!



Song: Polar Bear

Guitar and vocals: Gregoire Paultre

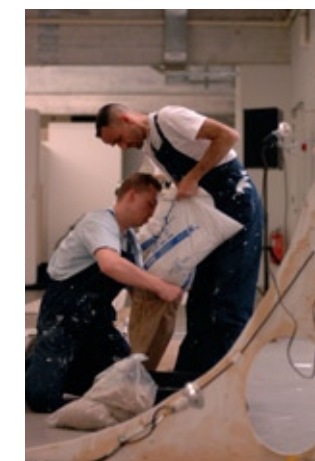
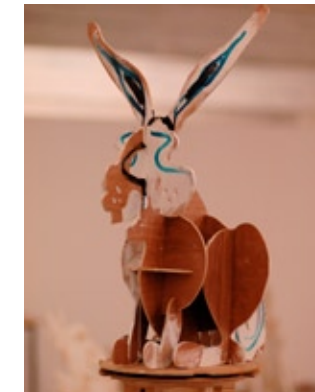
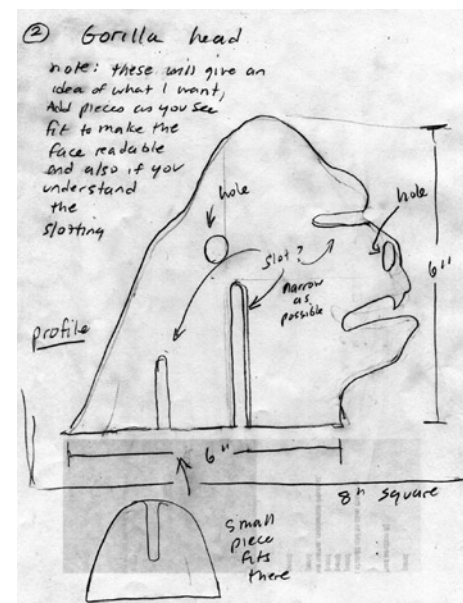
The Sun is Our Baby
It cries and we are warm
We wrap it in a blanket
Of smoke and toxic storm

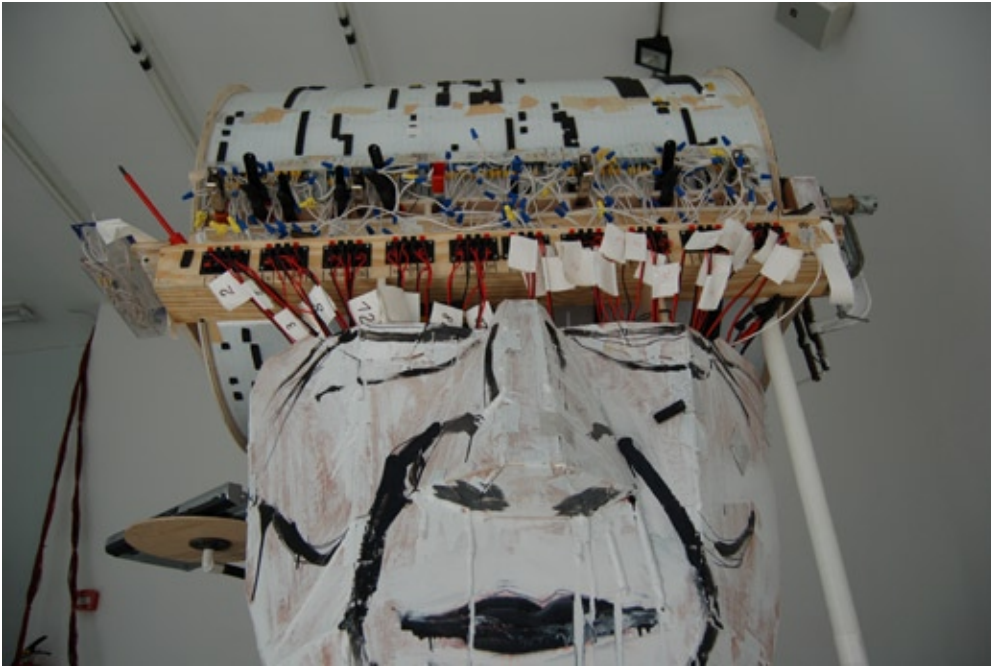
Polar Bears are standing
On Ice that's turning warm
And Polar bears are dying
But kleiner Icebears born

Do you see that pale blue pixel?
It's our only home
Will you watch me please on Youtube?
'Cause I feel so all alone

I don't believe in Global Warming
It's just a crown of thorns
But I do believe in suntans
So I lay here all the dawn

Polar Bears are standing
On ice that's turning warm
And Polar bears are dying
But kleiner Icebears born





Between 10 and 19 March 2008, Lars Kwakkenbos of the Kunstenfestivalvaldesarts held a discussion with Noah Fischer via e-mail. The following text is an excerpt from that e-mail exchange. Both *Rhetoric Machine* and *Pop Ark* are discussed in it.

In the first few days the e-mails centered on the types of rhetoric Fischer used and arranged in *Rhetoric Machine* and *Pop Ark*. The following excerpt opens with Noah's reflection on the question of how far the manner in which one talks about freedom, for instance, can in itself be free. Fischer then goes further into the meaning of electricity in his work, before finally reflecting on the performative character of the machines he builds.



Saturday 15 March 2008, on 7:41, Noah Fischer

Dear Lars,

Yes, freedom is a good theme and I hope that the Ark will take us there, although I can't promise a smooth ride.... I agree with you on the freedom paradox in political rhetoric. Of course, here in the US freedom is our favorite word and it has been totally twisted around. In the research for *Rhetoric Machine* I listened to many many presidential speeches and found a hard-wired pattern where a picture is painted of a road to freedom and to the utopian destiny of Americans (and people in general). Unfortunately, that road always had an obstacle on it – someone standing in the way of freedom. One last war and everyone will finally be free... I know working with this content sounds hard and heavy. It's not in the same spirit as the live chats or interviews in Little Red for example which as you say point a way toward a new use language – maybe a new rhetoric—that is not as weighed down by political history—that feels fresh. But given what it has felt like to see our government and legacy of the United States and global situation in general implode in the last 8 years—a truly strange nightmare like experience – a dark tunnel actually – I felt that this work needed to be done. Sometimes you just have to head right into the shit. That's why I love reading Kafka – some sort of hall of mirror mausoleum for human stupidity. These things have to be built and that is *Rhetoric Machine*. But then again *Rhetoric Machine* was in the end a (troubled) love story and I think if you can see that you really get the piece. *Pop Ark* is not really in the same direction. There is a strong link between the two with mass culture and persuasive language but as I said in a previous email, after *Rhetoric Machine* I wanted to get away from a pure critique of “the man” or the big institutional symbols. Al Gore as you say is another well practiced head mover, but he works kind of like a foil in this piece against a new freer feeling, rambling, mimicking, media savvy yet highly personal rhetoric. I was inspired by the kids who grew up with the internet as a fact of life and on their video blogs where they get to speak, edit, add sound, and network with their viewers, seem to have found a freedom (that word again) in the eye of the storm of commercial, superficial media. One thing about my background is that I grew up in California on a Buddhist monastery. It was modeled on a traditional Japanese one, and very beautiful and peaceful near the Pacific Ocean. People were meditating and healing themselves, very nice people but there was one problem maybe.



Anything outside of the monastery was referred to as “the real world.” So at the bottom of my practice is dealing with the shit of this real world— actually as a celebration/duty of living in it. When I say “dealing” I mean making art about it: remixing a very visible electricity which is the basic but invisible thing in society with elements of painting (signifiers of art) sound, narrative structures, etc. to craft an experience that is completely of the reality (shit) world but reorganizes it into art somehow. It is very hard work which means I have to be in my studio a lot – not hitch hiking on a Western highway – but I find a simple joy in things and time and in the state of the world as it is – in doing this, and I can share it. *Rhetoric Machine* was really that— a *Rhetoric Machine* and you could say that this machine was showing something it was kind of like a multi media essay. With *Pop Ark*, I cannot say what I am showing pointing out – it's more simple than that – it's a big vessel, an Ark. The exciting thing about the Ark is that it's on a voyage.

Noah



Saturday 15 March 2008, 19:59, Lars Kwakkenbos:

Hi Noah,

Thanks a lot for your answer.

Can you tell me more about that electricity you're talking about, and link it to the way you use it in your work, if possible? You talk about a very visible electricity in society, while your work seems to be characterized by a same sort of basic thing called electricity, that might link everything together. How does this work in *Rhetoric Machine*, and how does it work in *Pop Ark*? How does electricity help to reorganize reality (by making art with it)?

Lars

Saturday 17 March 2008, 7:23, Noah Fischer:

Hi Lars,

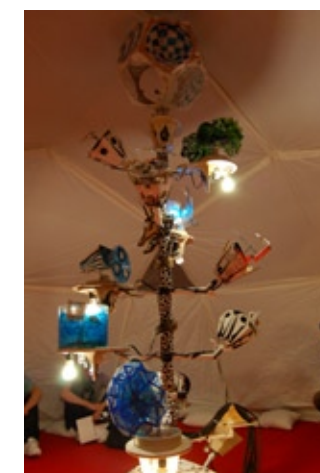
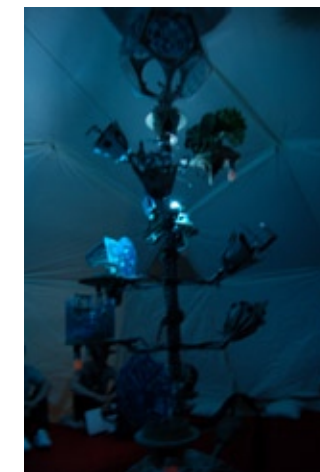
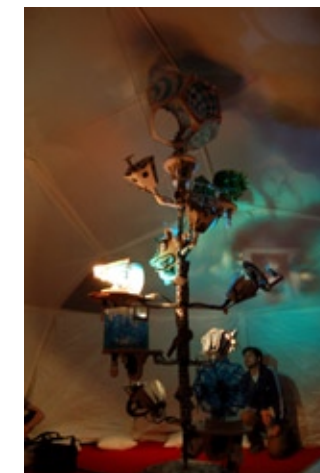
Here are some thoughts on electricity in my work.

One of the privileges of making art I think is to highlight ordinary things. This happens without doing anything—when we bring them into art context which can be a place of heightened sensory/ intellectual/historical awareness and debate. But I prefer to take a more active stance.

I would very much like to highlight electricity. It's light, warmth, power, and politics in a pure form. It's the energy that we live off. Yet for generations people have been taught to be scared of it, leave it to specialists, or just find it boring even though it's consumed at increasing levels. Like a traffic signal, or the glowing screen of the computer that you have to sit in front of all day, electricity exerts a certain amount of control over our lives but we can no longer really see it. I make work about power so I use power. Really, I have no choice. Even if I were painting with oil on canvas, or making ephemeral sand sculptures, a power grid looms somewhere in the background. That's western society. I choose to use this power in my work actively and, as we were saying before, to develop my thinking inside of this electrical work toward creating new forms. What about these forms? Well, electricity has rules that determine them. You touch certain wires and you will get shocked— a powerful sensation that I have experienced many times. Electricity tend to be either totally on or totally off— not wishy-washy. It's reality! Then when I started to work more with lights and motors, I found a freedom in it— avoiding being a “good electrician” and taming this force into a grid, but instead keeping alive an aspect of the raw power that initially fascinated me.

My work is lo-tec but more and more it's addressing the computer. The computer is either an electric brain or mirror. Laptops (which are featured in *Pop Ark*) and ipods and iphones and the like are getting smaller and smaller and we are encouraged to think less and less about electric power and more about experience, networks, emotions, connectivity, options. But don't be fooled — there is always something raw and dangerous and beautiful in electricity that maybe mirrors the same in the human mind. Behind the laptop there is a primitive thing and I would like to reveal this in my art.

In *Pop Ark* I have built switch boxes that look like laptops where all the power for the installation is routed. There will be a tall power pole with power lines up in the space. Controlling the installation — as with *Rhetoric Machine* — is



a large motorized timing drum covered with electrical wires called the “Gore-Bot” which works like a music box. I could use a small computer chip to do the exact same thing, but I want to bring the electricity out of the closet. This machine may seem antiquated, but in New York there is a metal box on every traffic light which is basically the same thing.

Noah



Monday 17 March 2008, 18:31, Lars Kwakkenbos:

Hi Noah,

What fascinates me in your answer is firstly: your awareness of the physical presence of electricity – it can be warm and it provides power, but it can also be harmful – and therefore its relation to our senses and our human body. Can you further explain that?

Second thing that fascinates me: the rawness, danger and beauty that is to be found in electricity might mirror rawness, danger and beauty in the human mind. Can you also further explain that? Do you turn your machines into metaphors for ways of thinking or feeling?

Lars

Tuesday 18 March 2008, 3:54, Noah Fischer:

Dear Lars,

Electricity is a physical experience and like I said, it becomes clear when you get a strong shock. I don't see them as bad things – It's a very foreign but interesting moment to interact with pure energy. In New York we have Times Square



which is as you know an area of highly concentrated electric lights and communications. When I get near it I have a strong reaction to the electric fields I usually start humming pop songs to myself – silence isn't possible there or maybe I have to start humming to reach silence – the mind making up for a negative charge.

To your second question – I was making the link between the brain and the computer and showing that there was actually a rawness to both although they seem like well organized working systems. It's a question of seeing the forest for the trees I guess. The way that we use electricity in human social life from big coal or water or nuclear generators through transformers and stepped down to street voltages, to the 110 or 220 in our apartments, finally into our laptops in low voltages where information floats around – is very much like a human anatomical system: the nervous system or blood circulation. We seem to have created a massive hungry electric



monster but mostly we just see the small side– the screen-saver or something. I like to focus on the big picture which is dangerous (not iPod-like). Also, this is what the Global Warming conversation is about or should be about it learning to step back. But it's not just an intellectual exercise it has to be hands on, so I advocate taking apart electric appliances to see how they work. You might even get shocked. Perceiving the rawness danger and beauty in humans work roughly the same way. You can read the newspaper, talk in depth with smart friends, drink tea and eat a nice meal and think everything's alright and civilization is ultimately winning out. But the answer is not really so clear. There is ongoing violence and injustice in the world that just defies logic. We're lucky not to be a part of it for the time being. So you have to step back on that too – there is more work to be done with understanding the human experience on this level.

Noah

Electricity seems to be closely linked to humankind because we have learned to harness it. And human civilization just exploded after that.

This text was published as a gallery booklet for the exhibition of *Rhetoric Machine* and *Pop Ark* at La Centrale électrique / De Elektriciteitcentrale in Bruxelles / Brussel as part of the Kunstenfestivaldesarts, 9-31 May 2008.

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