



NEWSLETTER

The Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities

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The Townsend Center is particularly pleased that Ken Goldberg, Professor of Industrial Engineering and Operations Research and of Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences, has agreed to offer the following account of the groundbreaking Art, Technology, and Culture Colloquium that he founded at Berkeley. In an important new development, Professor Goldberg informs us that the series will soon be a central part of the colloquia program of Berkeley's new Center for New Media.

- C.M.G.

THE ART, TECHNOLOGY, AND CULTURE COLLOQUIUM

Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert. - Donna Haraway



At 7:30 pm on January 21, 2001, over two hundred people are jammed into Kroeber Hall 160, filling all seats as well as the aisles and stage, well beyond capacity. One or two young rock-climbers perch high on the back wall. Chicago Art Institute Professor Eduardo Kac is about to discuss his artwork, "Transgenic Bunny," a glowing albino rabbit cloned with DNA from a phosphorescent algae, with an audience that includes students, faculty, and a number of local animal activists. As the lights dim, I realize that we not only have a potential fire hazard, but we may need campus security, and I've forgotten my cell phone. . . .

Berkeley's Art, Technology, and Culture Colloquium, now in its eighth year, is a regular forum for resisting conventional wisdom about technology and culture. This lecture series, free of charge and open to the public, presents highly accomplished artists, writers, curators, and scholars who address technology from a critical perspective.

UC Berkeley has long been a mecca for rigorous scholarship, public education, free speech, and unconventional thinking on a broad range of subjects. Our location in the Bay Area, perhaps the global center for research and development in high technology, provokes active interest in the long-term impact of technology on culture and on our daily lives. These concerns drive my own work as an engineer and artist.

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The ATC series was founded in 1997, when the economy was in full swing, digital technology was mushrooming, everyone was reading WiReD magazine, and the Internet was poised to take over our desktops. As a friend from France remarked, "the moment I got off the plane at SFO, I could *smell* the information."

With support from Kevin Radley and other Art Practice faculty, as well as from the Vice Chancellor's office, the series began with a presentation by Aaron Betsky, then SFMOMA Design Curator. "Icons in the Sprawl: Making Form in the Electrosphere" predicted the coming flood of digital iconography and its relation to runaway growth in urban architecture. In the fall of 1997, Berkeley philosopher Hubert Dreyfus transformed Kierkegaard's 1846 essay *The Present Age* into a contemporary critique of the Information Age, asking what role information technology might play in promoting a nihilistic leveling of meaningful distinctions. Since 1997, the ATC has presented over sixty provocative speakers. Through its email subscriber list, web pages, posters, and online audio-video archive, the series has established an international reputation.

Another memorable event in the series is pictured above. Billy Kluver, considered the Father of Electronic Art, flew from New Jersey to present his legendary 1960s

Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), involving performances and collaborations with artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Philip Glass. As we prepared for his visit, we discovered that the night of his talk would be his 70th birthday. We also learned that prior to joining Bell Laboratories, Dr. Kluver had earned his Ph.D. from Berkeley's Electrical Engineering Dept. in 1957 and that this was to be his first return to campus since then. After his talk we brought out a cake as the audience sang Happy Birthday. Kluver's Ph.D. advisor, EE Professor Emeritus John Whinnery, further surprised him by presenting him with a bound copy of his dissertation.

The long list of major artists and writers who have given ATC talks includes Gary Hill, Woody Vasulka, Julia Scher, Anne Wagner, Martin Jay, Lev Manovich, Peter Lunenfeld, Paul "DJ Spooky" Miller, Michael Joaquin Grey, Lynn Herschmann, Sara Diamond, Rich Gold, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Will Wright, and UCSD Professor and jazz trombonist George Lewis, who presented a history of computer music observing how improvisational jazz relates to the concepts of "noise" and statistical randomness.

Looking to the present, Mark Hansen, artist and assistant professor of statistics at UCLA (he received his Ph.D. from UC Berkeley), led off this year's schedule of

eight presentations. Following in Kluver's footsteps, Mark started working with New York sound artists while working at Lucent Labs. He and his collaborators sampled millions of lines from email traffic, filtered out all phrases beginning with "I am," organized them based on frequency and character count, and presented them in an acoustic installation that uses the most advanced text-to-speech system available. The result is an elegaic monologue that suggests a plaintive search for identity.

The next talk in this year's series will be given by Shawn Brixey and Richard Rinehart, who will describe their tele-robotic installation inspired by the maze-like challenge of unraveling the human genome. As demonstrated so clearly in the *Gene(sis)* exhibit of over 100 new artworks currently on view at the Berkeley Art Museum, biotechnology raises a new set of questions to which artists have been quick to respond. The Shawn Brixey / Richard Rinehart presentation is one of a number of events—the Donna Haraway Avenali Lecture last month was another—planned to complement the *Gene(sis)* show.

In November, Bay Area engineer and artist Jim Campbell will give an ATC talk on his work, in which low-resolution displays using light emitting diodes demonstrate how little information is needed to recognize fellow humans in motion. Later that month, New York artist Nina

Katchadourian will present quirky symbolic projects that transform everyday technologies such as car alarms by modifying them to emit combinations of birdcalls sampled from the Brazilian rainforest.

Starting off the spring term, New York artist Marie Sester will present in February a new project that explores surveillance and the fascist icon of the searchlight, using cameras and robotics to spotlight and track "innocent" pedestrians. Peter Selz, UC Berkeley Emeritus Professor and curator of Jean Tinguely's famous 1960 *Homage a New York*, the enormous machine sculpture that self-destructed in the garden of New York's Museum of Modern Art. Selz will show rare video of that event and of the first west coast exhibit of Kinetic Art, which he curated at the Berkeley Art Museum. In March, Vivian Sobchack, a scholar and film historian from UCLA who unpacks major topics while standing on one leg, will present her new work, a critical theory of the technology of prosthetics.

To close this year's program with a splash, the renowned Christopher Alexander, author of "A Pattern Language," architect, and UC Berkeley Emeritus Professor of Architecture, will return to campus from London to present his just-published magnum opus, the four-volume *The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe*.

In related news, it is a true honor to announce that some of the large issues that motivated the founding of the ATC series will now be pursued as well by UC Berkeley's newly-formed Center for New Media. Emerging in summer 2003 from Berkeley's Strategic Plan for New Initiatives, the CNM will facilitate collaboration between three major modes of inquiry: Humanities, Technology, and Arts/Design. Berkeley's commitment to nurturing the arts and humanities while building an outstanding center of technical research uniquely positions the CNM to respond to the broad spectrum of technologies for representation and communication that are based on the paradigm of computation. The CNM, led by professor Linda Williams, will bring together scholars from Art History, Architecture, Film Studies, Engineering, Journalism, Philosophy, and SIMS, as well as dozens of other disciplines to collaborate on research and new curricula. Plans include hiring of new faculty and a major new studio laboratory on campus. The ATC will be at the core of the CNM's Colloquia program.

The ongoing aim of the ATC Colloquium is to present unorthodox ideas and responses to technology that encourage skepticism without cynicism. Newspapers and magazines thrive on speculation about new technologies and how everything is just about to change. But historians and

scholars know that something new rarely appears under the sun; we must carefully scrutinize history, images, technologies, and ideas to anticipate and contextualize our next irrational exuberance.

Ken Goldberg
Professor of IEOR and EECS

Working this year with ATC Associate Director Greg Niemeyer (Art Practice), Assistant Therese Tierney, and the ATC Advisory Board, Ken Goldberg has again organized an outstanding series of presentations linking the humanities, arts, and technology. The ATC series is supported by the Office of the Chancellor, the College of Engineering Interdisciplinary Studies Program, the Berkeley Consortium for the Arts, the Art Practice Department, BAM/PFA, the Townsend Center, and Intel Corporation.

The ATC website, <http://www.ieor.berkeley.edu/~goldberg/lecs/>, lists 70 current and past speakers, program dates and times, and members of the Advisory Board. It also links to the ATC video/audio archive coordinated by Richard Rinehart of BAM/PFA.

- C.M.G.