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1-1-2008

The geekosystem: Adam Hyde and Julian Priest, with David Merritt

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The Physics Room, Christchurch 23 February – 22 March 2008

Many of us have memories, now reduced to nostalgic reminiscence, of the first time we persuaded our family's Sinclair ZX Spectrum to move a glowing green pixel a centimetre or two to the left. At this moment we experienced the magic of programmed motion. Too quickly these early machines disappeared into obsolescence and the desire for faster and more became the dominant feature of human computer relationships, as we succumbed to the lure of the next techno-gadget. In the early twenty-first century it is essential to think about the technological footprints we are leaving in our wake as we continuously upgrade, discard and move on. In the geekosystem, Adam Hyde, Julian Priest and David Merritt forced a reconsideration of these one-way economics of techno-development. Socially, economically, and environmentally they gave us pause to reconsider—not simply possibilities for reuse and recycling but the very physical and emotional engagements that we have with these technologies.

Adam Hyde is a New Zealand born, Amsterdam-based artist, educator, tactical media practitioner, streaming media consultant and sometime curator. Julian Priest is an independent artist and researcher based in Wanganui, New Zealand. He was co-founder of Consume.net, one of the first wireless FreeNetwork communities, and his work has developed from network activism into spectrum policy engagement, wireless development work and media art practice. Together with David Merritt (a stalwart of the networked art scene in New Zealand, and the author of Internet: a New Zealand Users Guide, 1995), Hyde and Priest created a relational space that not only introduced new audiences to digital technologies but used these materials to question the role of galleries (and art) within today's networked culture.

The geekosystem operated through a carefully constructed sequence, a methodology of input-output twisted ever so slightly. Initial publicity showed crate upon crate of orphaned, outdated equipment ready for transport. After exhaustive documentary steps were taken, the gear was transported south to Christchurch. Once in the gallery, materials were unpacked and the geekosystem booted up. Tables were laden with soldering irons, tangled cabling, dodgy disk drives, wires, and various electronic entrails. Gradually objects and devices made by people who would not necessarily call themselves artists were excreted onto plinths at the far end of the space.

One corner of the gallery was given over to regeneration, as outmoded proprietary software manuals were fed through a shredder. These shreddings were mixed with coffee grounds from local cafes, nourishing worms and, eventually, spinach seedlings. Something had been transformed. Whether it was the cathartic thrill of feeding Get Started With Windows guides to the shredder, I'm not sure, but this was a new kind of art experience. A relationship was built between the source material and the media from which it was produced. The experience was not, this time, one of nostalgia. Nostalgia is not productive and the geekosystem was. The promises of technology finally delivered something we really could consume.

Embracing a world of do-it-yourself and open source (both in software and hardware) the geekosystem offered a working interface where downloaded recipes lined a wall and suggested the possibility of making 'art' out of technology. Along the way the geekosystem reflected on the major ecological and biological side effects of our insatiable need for technology. Community focused and social, it was in essence a craft circle with a political framework. The gallery became a place for people to come to make things, socialise, and

think about the rate at which we discard the useful yet outmoded. The geekosystem reminds us that systems are essentially cyclical, and based on renewal rather than obsolescence. As evidence, ancient systems were lovingly nursed back into operation—in a tribute to its own history a ZX sat beside an Apple IIC and used its 16K of ram to scroll useless but potentially interesting data.

These machines and all their accoutrements are deeply rooted in our daily activities; our work and leisure embedded within the matrices of aluminium, silicon, mercury, arsenic and numerous other toxic chemicals. It is possible to be overwhelmed when confronted with dead and deconstructed machines, but the geekosystem gave us busy work, activities that generated an illusion of critical creativity. Left lingering was the question why certain outputs were reified as 'art', separated out from the system and placed on plinths. In this structured engagement between the geeks and the artworld there was a paradoxical sense of a need for art's valorising structures. Simultaneously, the busy-work nature of much of the engagement allowed for the breakdown of these structures, as different audiences followed recipies and manipuated the materials according to their familiarities with the tools at hand. What was offered in the geekosystem was more than a chance to offset the guilt of air miles by planting a tree; instead participants gained a hint of responsibility (and potentially respectability) as we simultaneously coveted the new Macbook air and wove ourselves a fashionable belt out of discarded cabling. The geekosystem was machine art at a human scale.

by [Su Ballard](#)