

Research re-imagined

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Images courtesy of the artists

In the summer of 2009, Cat Balco was one of a dozen artists whose work was featured in *Status Update*, a multimedia art exhibition at Haskins Laboratories – curated by the Arts Council of Greater New Haven’s director of artistic programs and services, Debbie Hesse, and Donna Ruff – that explored the use of emerging social networking technologies. When that exhibition came down, Hesse asked Balco to work with her on an exhibition that would pair artists with scientists and researchers at Haskins Laboratories, a nonprofit research facility that studies speech, reading, and related technologies – an exhibition that would engage Haskins Laboratories as more than a natural venue.

The resulting show, *Mind Sets*, had, as its jumping-off point, the “apparent conflicts between the scientific and artistic ways of thinking,” said Balco, who co-curated the exhibition with Hesse. “What happens,” Balco asked as a matter of example, “if we put two very different minds” to work on the same ideas?

Balco, a New Haven-based artist who teaches at the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford, said, “There’s been a lot of energy for this kind of collaboration in the art world recently.”

Working as a consultant to Yale University’s School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, where she was charged with integrating artwork into Kroon Hall, Balco became interested in the ways artists and scientists are working together.

“There are a lot of artists who are working in that kind of space ... between science and art,” she said, pointing to the United Nations Environment Programme’s Art for the Environment project as an example.

West Hartford-based artist Carol Padberg, a colleague of Balco’s at the Hartford Art School, used as her muse Haskins Laboratories’ Pattern Playback – “an early talking machine that was built by Dr. Franklin S. Cooper and his colleagues at Haskins Laboratories in the late 1940s,” according to language on the Haskins Laboratories website.

“I’ve been working with encoded abstraction,” Padberg said, referring specifically to fonts and bar codes. “This is the first time I’ve worked with waveforms.”

Padberg had Haskins Laboratories CEO and Senior Scientist Philip Rubin read a poem by 12th century poet Ibn ‘Arabi and send her the waveform generated by the Pattern Playback. On this Padberg based the works she contributed to *Mind Sets*.

“This truly pushed me into this new direction,” she said.

While she’d been thinking about language for years, Padberg said “this notion of digital language – taking spoken word and making it into imagery ... that’s right up my alley.”

New Haven-based artist Martha Lewis, too, used the Pattern Playback as her inspiration, arriving, though, at a very different end. She based her work on the machine itself, and the museum at Haskins Laboratories in which it resides.

“It’s a very odd-looking machine,” Lewis said. “My piece is a kind of response to that.”

“A lot of the things about the sound (of the Pattern Playback) reminded me of spy talk,” she said, referring to sentences generated by the machine such as “A large size in stockings is hard to sell,” and “Never kill a snake.”

She was equally fascinated with the machine’s history, as well as what she described as a “weird” picture of Caryl Parker Haskins. Lewis described her installation as a “poetic combination of all these things.”

Bethel-based artist Fritz Horstman collaborated with Christine Shadle. When reading about her work, Horstman’s attention was caught by the phrase “aerodynamics of speech,” which he found fit well with his interest in “trying to find the various places where nature and culture either converge or diverge.”

What he worked with in creating work for the *Mind Sets* exhibition were MRIs that showed what goes on within an individual’s upper body, neck, and head when he or she makes various sounds. The images, Horstman said, had “extremely elegant” shapes. He connected the human body to nature and language to culture.

After studying the MRI images, Horstman, using a mirror, observed for himself that his “body makes these shapes in order to produce the sounds of language.” Then, using that very sentence – “My body makes these shapes in order to produce the sounds of language” – he counted 39 distinct shapes, drew them in the style of the MRIs, on a 12-foot length of paper, and cut them out, presenting the above-mentioned sentence as empty space.

Participating artist Eva Lee worked with Dr. Einar Mencl, director of neuroimaging research at Haskins Laboratories, and, based on their conversations, created a visual poem called *Word Brain*.

In an e-mail, Lee wrote, “The Haskins project fits my interests because at the heart of my work is me wondering what the nature of mind and reality is. Science, as one way to investigate mind, yields some fascinating research and knowledge. At Haskins, where scientists look at the mind/brain connection in the context of language, I thought I would make art using their MRI images and words relevant to their studies. The resultant animation was a visual poem. As an artist I enjoy making work based on scientific materials or findings because I get to learn in the process, and hopefully, what I represent is evocative and more than the sum of its parts for the viewer.”

For Brooklyn-based artist Lucy Kim, collaborating with a scientist was interesting because “what they do is just so bizarre to me.” As an artist interested on “surface modulation” – that is, juxtaposing two- and three-dimensional elements – Kim “zoomed in on one researcher right away.” Takayuki Ito’s work focuses on how the manipulation of the facial skin and muscles alters how we perceive sound and language. Both, Kim said, are interested in “some kind of distortion based on surface modulation.”

Matt Sargent, a Hartford-based composer, created a piece for percussionist Bill Solomon based on studies by Bruno Hermann Repp, whose research, Sargent said, “has to do with synchronization and perception of rhythm.”

Sargent had Solomon record his piece – a series of non-repeating rhythms – 30 times with a click track. Sargent built a computer program that turned the click track off a little sooner with each performance, leaving Solomon to follow his perception of time. Sargent then took those 30 versions of his piece and layered them on top of one another.

Because *Mind Sets* is the result of artists’ responses to scientists’ research – and not just about each artist’s individual work – Balco thought it important to produce

something documenting that process and approached Hartford Art School colleague Natacha Poggio about the possibility of having students from her Design Global Change program put together a catalog. Hartford Art School juniors Nikki Lee and Mullica Zudsiri, with Lee as team leader, were chosen to do just that.

“Why not (throw) another collaboration in this mix,” Balco said.

Participating Mind Sets artists are: Fritz Horstman, Zachary Keeting, Lucy Kim, Eva Lee, Martha Lewis, Laura Marsh, Kim Mikenis, Carol Padberg, Dushko Petrovich, Cuyler Remick, Matt Sargent, Bill Solomon, Susan Classen-Sullivan, and Paul Theriault. Mind Sets is on view at Haskins Laboratories through January 28, 2011. Hours are Wednesday-Friday, 10am- 4pm. Haskins Laboratories is located at 300 George St., 9th floor, New Haven. For more information, visit www.newhavenarts.org.