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When Art and Science Collide, a Dorkbot Meeting Begins

By BRIAN BRAIKER

The artists may have ceded SoHo to swanky shops and million-dollar digs, but once a month the scene at one of its remaining galleries might best be described as Revenge of the Nerds.

On a recent Wednesday, "dorkbot" was holding the first meeting of its sixth year at the Location One gallery. Scruffy hipsters toting six-packs, blinky Web developers arguing the merits of their preferred P.D.A. and an inordinate number of dreadlocked heads packed the gallery beyond capacity to hear three brief, charmingly unpolished lectures.

Founded five years ago by Douglas Repetto, the director of research at Columbia University's computer music center, dorkbot is an informal club of artists, techies and geeks who do "strange things with electricity," according to their motto. In five years, chapters of the club have sprung up in nearly 30 cities around the world, from Seattle to Rotterdam to Mumbai.

At every New York meeting, Mr. Repetto invites three people to deliver 20- to 30- minute presentations of their work, which tends to inhabit a no-man's land between science and art. A question-and-answer session follows, which serves as an informal peer review to help presenters hone their ideas, Mr. Repetto said.

"They're doing things, but they're not quite sure, What is this? Where does it fit?" Mr. Repetto said. "It doesn't belong in a gallery, and they can't write a paper on it."

This month's meeting was held on what may or may not have been Sir Isaac Newton's 363rd birthday, but the fact that history is unclear on that matter did not dissuade Mr. Repetto, 35, from enlisting him as the evening's mascot. Slides of Newton and Newton-related arcana flashed across a screen before the lectures began.

But what would Sir Isaac have made of Mikey Sklar?

Mr. Sklar, a UNIX engineer presenting at dorkbot for the second time, demonstrated how he had a \$2 chip surgically implanted into his left hand - and why he did it. The Radio Frequency Identification tag under his skin uses the same technology that the E-ZPass system employs to identify cars on toll roads. Mr. Sklar, 28, said his tag unlocks his computer and accesses news feeds as part of an art project.

"This is a pretty crude attempt at becoming a little more cyborg," he explained to the audience, only half joking.

As for why he chose dorkbot for the debut of his body-hack, Mr. Sklar wrote in an e-mail message: "This forces me to get my act together. By that I mean I have to clearly document my project and come up with an explanation of why I did this work."

Also at the dorkbot meeting were Alyce Santoro, an artist who weaves funky textiles out of a "sonic fabric" of audiotape and cotton, and Luke DuBois, a composer and "computational artist," who discussed a process he developed called "time-lapse phonography."

Mr. DuBois used his application, essentially time-lapse photography for sound, to create a new piece of music out of the 857 songs that have appeared at the top of the Billboard charts since 1958. The result, called "Billboard," is a 37-minute-long drone: each hit song is reduced to its average timbre and key by an algorithm that speeds up the original work without giving it a chipmunk chirpiness.

"It's a great way to get a gestalt of a piece of music," Mr. DuBois explained.

With popular tech and culture Web sites like boingboing.net and gothamist.com linking to dorkbot listings (at dorkbot.org) and even presenters' home pages, the monthly event has also become one way for artists and engineers to generate publicity.

"I've gotten more links from dorkbot than from any other Web site," said Michelle Rosenberg, an artist who delivered a lecture on the history of [hearing aids](#) and presented her own headphone sculptures at a meeting last January.

"It was a group critique," she said. "The questions asked were informal and curious. You have a different group of people coming to dorkbot than would come to an art lecture."

And that, said Mr. Repetto, is the whole point.

"If you have to tell people you're giving a presentation at something called dorkbot," he added, "you can't be too serious."