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HYPERALLERGIC

Artists Tinker with Tech at an E-Waste Warehouse

For a one-night exhibition at the Lower East Side Ecology Center's e-waste warehouse in Gowanus, artists transformed outdated and damaged devices into interactive installations and sculptures.



Jean Shin, “BR data 2007–2011” and “PU files 1999–2001” from the series *E-bundle* (2017)

An outdated Walkman, a dust-filled VCR player, or a keyboard fizzled out from spilled sodas — such consumer electronics we no longer want are accepted with open arms at the Gowanus E-Waste Warehouse, where they’re sent off to be properly recycled or refurbished, then sold, to be enjoyed by someone else. Operated by the Lower East Side Ecology Center, the warehouse represents New York City’s largest municipal provider of e-waste recycling services, and it shelters thousands of items of technological

detritus in limbo. On a recent evening, these objects were transformed into site-specific installations by a small group of artists, given alternative — albeit brief — lives with unexpected value.

Monument, a one-night-only exhibition, was organized by artist-in-residence Penelope Umbrico (yes, the warehouse offers residencies) along with the warehouse's program director Yazmine Mihojevich. The works occupied one corner of the warehouse and were mapped out on distributed floor plans, without which I would have largely been left wondering what was and wasn't art.

A reliable clue was that nearly all the ephemeral installations incorporated screens that still functioned. Umbrico's served as the show's focal point: a makeshift wall of LCD TVs with cracked screens, each playing a DVD of a horror movie or series that she had found at the warehouse. The scenes were only partially visible, their visuals largely lost beneath enchanting rainbow streaks of broken hardware. As Umbrico described to me, she wanted viewers to consider the relationships between our bodies and the body of the screen; how we tend to think of both as nearly invisible until they break. On the other side of the room stood her monument to the long-dead ancestors of these LCD screens: stacks of CRT TVs, bound together by plastic wrap like bulky hoagies, and each assembled to a height slightly taller than the average human. Created in collaboration with Daniel Vargas, they formed a shiny maze through which visitors could roam, with the sheathed screens resembling stout obelisks in a cramped graveyard.

Also highlighting the physicality of the digital screen were artists Faith Holland and Motoko Fukuyama. In Holland's hands, iPads and iPhones were treated solely as canvases — both digital and traditional ones. Four devices propped on a table looped GIFs she created, but that art was largely veiled by the layers of foreign material she applied to their screens, from nail polish to moisturizer to pubic hair. Nearby, a large video projection by Fukuyama looped footage of smashed screens, treated as surfaces for noisemaking: we were shown drumsticks and fingers tapping on

broken glass, then footage of something being wrapped in plastic, layer after layer. The video was short but never-ending, documenting the afterlife of electronics in a form that resembled a catchy commercial.

Where electronics were really positioned as obsolete was in Constant Dullaart's contribution, a swing whose seat was a keyboard still connected to a monitor a few feet away. Sitting on those buttons, of course, produced only gibberish commands. The aptly titled "Fdghfdegfdthghhgg" was a favorite of the children present.

Meanwhile, others were playing a digital scavenger hunt of sorts, created by Charles Sainty. "Remains (After Paris)" was the only piece that sought to strike a serious note. It consisted of an augmented reality application Sainty built after news of President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement. Holding one of the cameras of the provided iPads up to an unmarked but connected object resulted in an ominous scene of climate change on screen: a view of an oil spill in the room, or of people suddenly standing below water due to rapidly rising sea levels. Its visuals were slightly gimmicky, but the project's political bent made it stand out from the other, more purely playful fare.

Nearly invisible were two pieces by Jean Shin that seemed like products of the warehouse's housekeeping system, easily passable as someone's maniacally organized bundle of cords. They resembled poufs made of carefully wound cords, but the wires really entombed a hidden laptop and a Power Mac G3, forming shells of rubber spaghetti. They were cocoons of hidden data — sturdy, material armor to protect digital memories and other immaterial information.

On the other hand, what is usually hidden came into full view in Elana Herzog's installation, the pointedly titled "A History of Film." Coils of black film spilled out from a large cardboard box; Herzog had individually unspooled each one from video reels. The small, shiny mountain they formed immediately spoke to the labor-intensive act, but also recalled a

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sludgy oil spill, which prodded me to consider the film industry's impact on the environment.

Although not all the works in *Monument* directly addressed climate change, the problem of how much waste our technology-dependent lifestyles generate and how we may deal with these discards was inevitable — in no small part simply due to the cluttered location. Later that night, instrumental ensemble Das Audit offered another creative solution, performing freeform songs with amplifiers, an electronic bass, and a reel-to-reel tape machine all salvaged from the warehouse. Around them, people double-fisted pickles and beer; illuminating the darkening space was Fukuyama's looping video, a cycle of destruction and new life all in one.