

## In San Francisco, Closing the Gap Between Art and Tech

by [Gabrielle Selz](#) on January 5, 2016



Installation view of “Entangled” (2015) by Camille Utterback in ‘NEAT: New Experiments in Art and Technology’ at the Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco (photo by Johnna Arnold, courtesy the artist and Haines Gallery, San Francisco, CA)

SAN FRANCISCO — In an exhibition on view at the [Contemporary Jewish Museum](#), nine Bay Area artists play with robotics, sculpture, lights, sound, video, and digital technologies to alternately engage, critique, and embrace our present-day entanglement with the digital world. Curated by Renny Pritikin with consultation from artist Paolo Salvagione, [NEAT: New Experiments in Art And Technology](#) reimagines [E.A.T. \(Experiments in Art and Technology\)](#), a collaboration launched in 1967 between artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman and scientists and engineers from Bell Laboratories. While the original project involved nine evenings of performance and theater, featuring predominately New York-centric visionaries like John Cage, Yvonne Rainer, and Robert Rauschenberg, *NEAT* focuses on a moment/movement on the West Coast where art, technology,

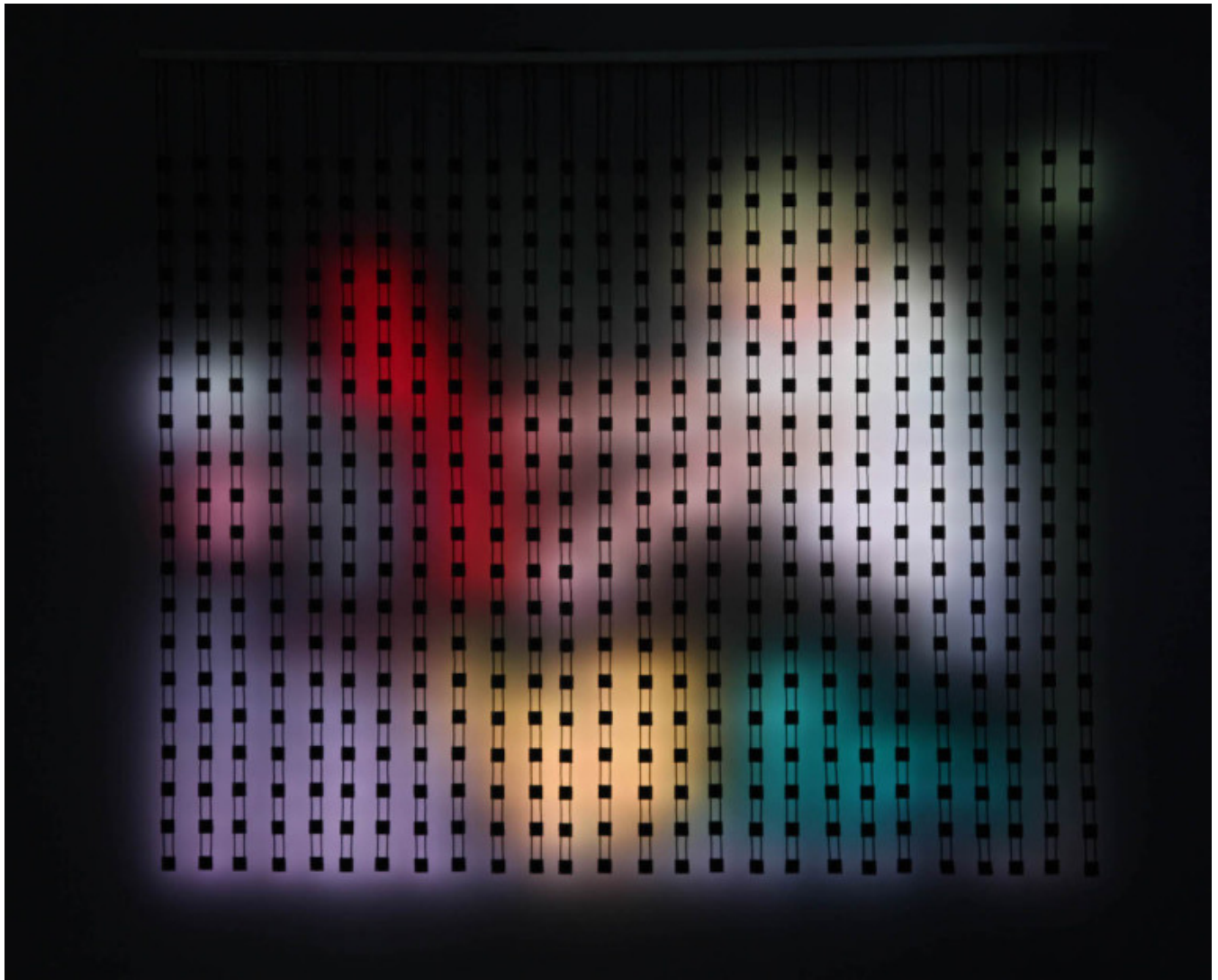
and coding methodology have become so intermingled, it's no longer advantageous to elucidate their differences.



Paolo Salvagione, "Rope Fountain" (2015), nylon rope, 3D printed housing, motors, control electronics, code, variable dimensions (image courtesy the artist)

This is San Francisco in 2016, with its deep connections to Silicon Valley, where tech giants like Google, Apple, and SpaceX create workplaces so conducive to the needs of their staff that work and play have become synonymous. Many San Francisco artists do not draw distinctions between the process of art and the practice of technology. In fact, many of the artists in the *NEAT* show are originally trained as engineers and coders. Digital coding and technical manipulation have become the paintbrushes of the era.

What these artists share in the creation of their work is simple: computers. Sometimes, how they use them is not obvious — as a featured piece by [Paolo Salvagione](#) demonstrates; it really doesn't matter whether viewers understand the mechanics behind the works' visual tricks. They may be the result of happenstance, magic, or technology. With a past that included reading philosophy and fabricating bicycles, Salvagione's installations intersect both the immaterial realm of ideas and the manufactured object. In "Rope Fountain," Salvagione activates the viewer's sense of wonder by bringing the motion and surprise of a fountain inside the museum. The fountain is created from a looping rope that whips and wiggles through the air, making line drawings in space and conveying a sometimes playful, and occasionally menacing, presence.



Jim Campbell, “Broken Movie” (2015), video installation: custom electronics, LEDs, variable dimensions, 8 x 10 ft (courtesy the artist and Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco)

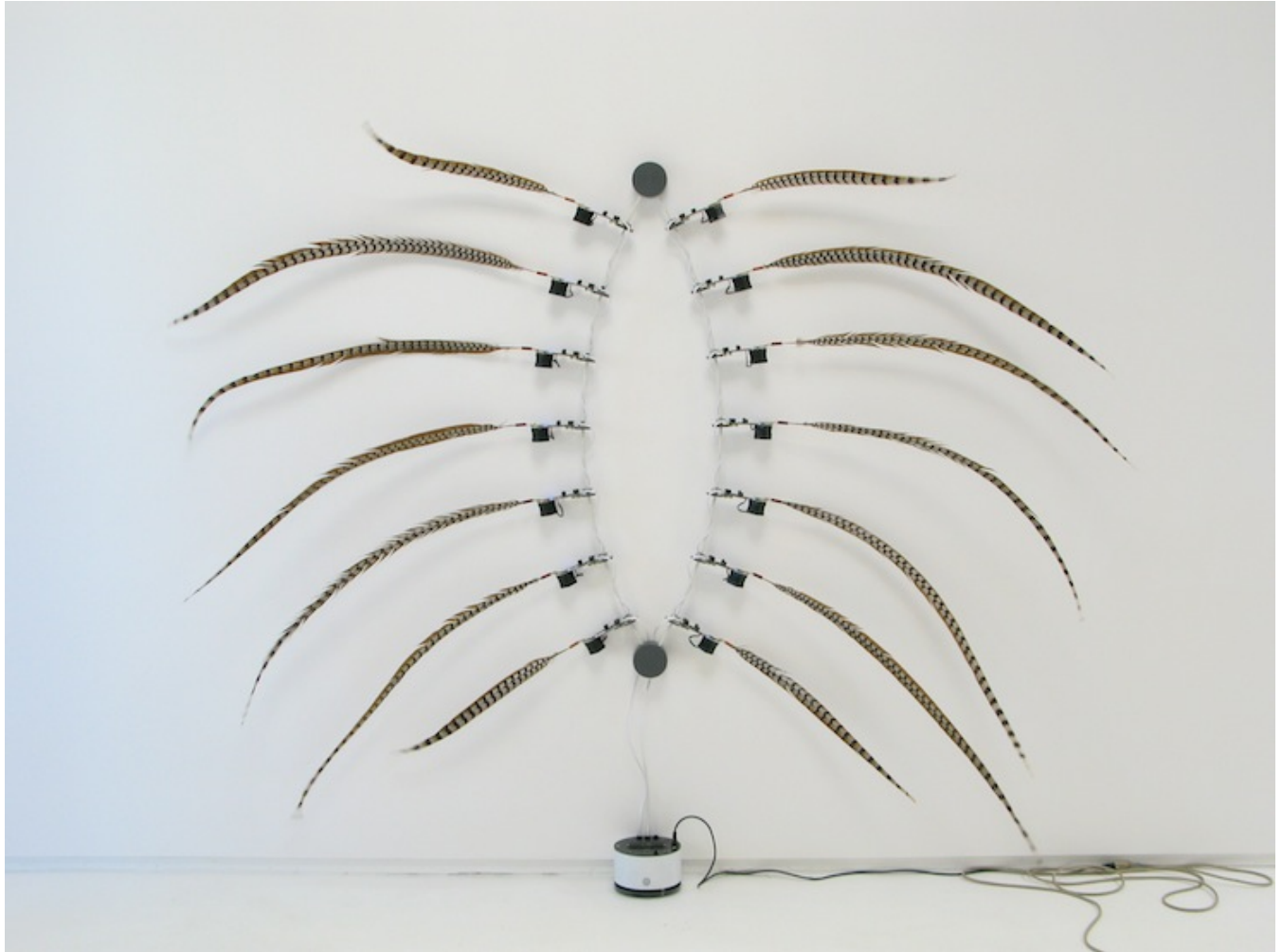
Further into the exhibit, artist **Jim Campbell**, trained as an electronic engineer, makes light installations that are at once figurative and tantalizingly abstract. In “Broken Movie,” Campbell offers a mural-sized projection augmented by strategically spaced pixels on the adjoining walls to create a three-dimensional format. The resulting space is immersive and collaborative, asking the viewer to consider both the limits and the nature of perception, to fill in the gap between what is observed and what is imagined.

This desire to fold the viewer’s experience into the object is explored in the sculptures of Alan Rath. While Campbell and Salvagione create works that illuminate the haunting and mysterious aspects of technologically-enhanced art, **Rath’s** sculptures graft human characteristics onto machines. Since the early 1980s, Rath has pioneered kinetic and robotic sculpture. He cites the 1969 Apollo 10 liftoff and moon landing, which Rath watched on TV as a child, and the repurposing of electronics in the music of Jimi Hendrix as influences. Though Rath did not become a musician, he was intrigued by the potential of electronics to create a new form of kinetic sculpture and went on to get a degree in electrical engineering from M.I.T. before moving to San Francisco to practice art and be near Silicon Valley. In his work, he builds what he calls his own autonomous electronic systems. Machines are often made humorous, humane, musical, and fluid. In “Forever” (2012), Rath combines aluminum with excitable pheasant feathers in a kinetic, mechanical, and animated



sculpture. We are never sure if we are contemplating the at once playful and threatening object, or if it is contemplating us.

Investing an object with life is a thread that is elaborated on in the work of **Camille Utterback**, who takes this idea one step further by endowing her pieces with memory and its subsequent erasure. For several years, Utterback has been combining technologies and coding with traditional visual media to create an interactive lexicon. In “**Entangled**,” real-time graphics tracking viewer’s movements are projected onto three scrims, generating a multi-layered, painterly animation. The images evolve and transform. They describe movement and subtle motion as well as disappearance. Viewers face one another on either side of the transparent scrims, creating, in tandem, an ever-changing artwork.



Alan Rath, “Forever” (2012), aluminum, polyethylene, fiberglass, software, motor, feathers, 90 x 108 x 48 in. (courtesy the artist and Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco)

In the context of *NEAT*’s framework, Utterback’s work underscores, like many other pieces in this show, Robert Rauschenberg’s profound legacy as an artist interested in creating an art form that recorded the gap between life and technology. Today, this gap has all but vanished. Technology is ubiquitous. What was unfamiliar 50 years ago — when productions like *EAT* ushered unknown methodologies into art spaces — is the new norm of today. In *NEAT*, we are presently witnessing the poetic negotiation that occurs when technology becomes an extension of our bodies.

***NEAT: New Experiments in Art And Technology*** continues at the Contemporary Jewish Museum (736 Mission St, San Francisco) through January 17.