

Q&A

with artist Eric Paulos

Your focus is on citizen science and critical making. Could you briefly explain what these mean?

Both celebrate the potential for technology to empower broader participation, voice, and action in our work. With Citizen Science I am interested in how everyday technologies embedded with sensing and computation can enable us to collectively question, make sense, and see our world in new ways. In Critical Making I am, similarly, interested in the rise of the “Expert Amateur” within the new landscape of digital fabrication and making. This “New Making Renaissance” is a fundamentally disruptive technology that will alter the method and models of participation, making, economic, education, medicine, and beyond. As an artist, my work intentionally positions itself to generate tension between celebratory and cautionary themes within these emerging technologies.

How central is the use of recycled materials to your message?

The material choices for the Energy Parasites are intentional. They avoid an aesthetic of high tech fabrication and foreground physical ideas of reuse. The Energy Parasites themselves are provocative. They harvest energy but this is not for free — they are in effect stealing energy — requiring it and repossessing it, highlighting the sites where it can be captured and the opportunities for its reuse. What does it mean to capture small bits of energy from a fountain, for example, and then to use that energy to charge your phone and finally to make a call from energy stolen from that fountain? From a city bus? From a police car’s headlights? The experience would be shattered if these devices were all 3D printed and fabricated. Yes, they would still function but the aesthetics of a commercial product would dominate — which is not what I desired for this piece.

Is there a long term vision to your projects? Where do you see them going in the next 10 years?

My work has been consistent in both being innovative in making a contribution from a technical side as well as critiquing the technology. Much of the work can be viewed as critical design. However, much of my work is less focused on immediate problem-

solving and more on problem-making or problem-framing. There is tremendous focus on technology providing greater productivity and efficiency in our lives. But what about technology that makes us more curious or wonder about our world and lives, or that can provide us radically “new ways of seeing”?

What is the real message behind Energy Parasites, what is it critiquing about society?

It’s about new models of participation, ownership, and engagement with energy. On a basic level it’s critiquing the way energy projects are approached. There is a vast body of work exploring how technological solutions can help reward us by saving a few cents on energy or punish us for its overuse. Energy Parasites open up a new conversation of how energy can have a materiality. What if it has characteristics of being handcrafted, locally generated, emotional, and so on? What new opportunities emerge from framing ideas around energy from this perspective? Yes, lots of little bits of energy does not an energy crisis solve but I believe passionately that it helps reframe the problem, invites new models of participation, and ultimately creates important inflection points to advance the debate and solve the problem in novel ways.