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Observations on Eyeo and the psyche of a creative technologist

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Amit Pitaru talking about Sonic Wire Sculptor

I'm lucky to be in Minneapolis right now for the brilliant [Eyeo Festival](#) full of great art/tech/data vis people. I was here in 2011 for the first Eyeo and that experience set my expectations way high for this year's festival. So far I am not disappointed. The insight, enthusiasm and character radiating from the stages are as exciting as the variety and openness of the attendees.

This year I'm in an interesting place personally and professionally, a few months ago I had the great fortune of becoming a father. For the next while I am going to be stay at home dad to my wonderful daughter. I'm taking this time away from the pressures delivering and lining up gigs to consider where I want to head next.

I've been at this creative tech stuff for more than five years now (dating back to the unexpectedly fateful co-creation of [TXTris](#) in 2007). There are parts of the work I love, love, love: creating playful, unique and occasionally magical experiences and getting to see people use them. And parts I don't love: too much solitary work and my mediocrity in lining up new things that pay the rent.

So, what's next? How do I keep combining the amazing cornucopia of technology we have before us in exciting and human ways while moving forward. How do I go about providing nutrition and shelter for my family unit while maintaining some integrity to my work and self?

I know these questions are not unique to me and this is a pretty good place to find others looking for some of these answers. My mind being where it is, here is an utterly fragmented selection chord striking notes from the first 48hrs of my Eyeo:

[Subjectivity and paraphrasing note: I make no assurances as to the accuracy of the following notes. In fact they may be exactly opposite to the views expressed by the people named due to my poor note taking.]

[Zach Lieberman](#) spoke persuasively on the need for people, specifically artists, who are not CEOs of technology companies taking charge of how technology evolves. Left to the CEOs we simply get "Better, faster, newer! Buy now!". Also: [School For Poetic Computation](#) that Zach and others are starting in NYC (weird and slightly offputting name, but created by an impressive team so I'll be watching it).

Next came a whirlwind of 5 minute Ignite talks. I totally failed to note take but [Katie McCurdy](#) on the power of self-visualising health data for illumination and diagnosis sticks in my mind.

[Jen Lowe](#) spoke eloquently with Laura Kurgan on the work they're doing on rigorous data viz at the [Spacial Information Design Lab](#). They're taking messy, incomplete and sometimes misleading data and working them into things that have real meaning – from data on the motions of oil tankers around the globe to the results of experimentation with neurons.

Jen also spoke a little about the fact that what we choose to make important today defines the future. True that and something I need to keep in mind.

[Kyle McDonald](#) drenched us with a metaphorical firehouse full of crazy ideas (of the kind he pulls off so successfully). I was taken by the idea of a machine that sorts a stream of beach sand by the colour of each grain (using computer vision and galvo motors) and draws back onto the beach using the sand itself.

Kyle urged others to be free and open with their ideas, thinking of them as packets of meaning to be shared. A way to express your thoughts and trigger connections and collaboration.

[Memo Atken](#), who creates beautiful and various work, suggested that we "fuck what clients say they want" and do what we want to do and a few of them will respect you for it (and, it is assumed, pay you for it). Possibly that advice is easier to stick to if you're a mad-productive genius, but I think there's some truth in there for the rest of us.

[Amit Pitaru](#) gave a great demo of his stylus based musical instrument [Sonic Wire Sculptor](#). He spoke compellingly

about the evolution of the project from an instrument for his own use into a public installation that anyone could play with. Initially he was surprised that people didn't just take to the experience naturally. Then he'd experimented with changes to the way system was presented to enable people to engage with the piece. This kind of iterative tweaking to get to an experience that truly works (rather than one that kinda works and looks good in the Youtube video) is more rare than it should be in our field I think (I'm guilty of this, often rushing to the next project).

The slowest Vietnamese restaurant service in the world meant I missed half of [Jake Barton's](#) talk. He talked about the installation of early prototyping at the core of his companies approach to new projects. Prototyping as simple and effective way to resolve questions and demonstrate and test what consideration and discussion cannot. It's hard to argue with some of the great projects like [Gallery One](#) that Jake's company Local Projects turn out.

[Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](#) is a Mexican-Canadian artist who creates interactive and reactive pieces that explore themes of surveillance and biometrics. With his studio he has produced many powerful and provocative pieces around the world. I've been fortunate to interact with [Pulse Front](#) in person (a large scale outdoor piece which translates the participant's heart beat into a powerful column of pulsing light in the night sky).

About half way through Rafael's talk took a dramatic and gut-wrenching turn. Enthusiastically moving towards the projection screen behind him to point out a detail, Rafael missed his footing and fell from the edge of the stage. He didn't reappear though his groans of pain were audible, staff rushed to help, emergency personnel arrived and the audience were ushered out in muffled horror.

Rafael had broken two ribs (not good but not the worst) and was able to see the humour in the event that very night, Tweeting "Lecture leads to a couple of broken ribs: being a nerd is dangerous! Thx for the good vibes, will spend the night at hospital #eyeo".

Luckily the stage at the following nights keynote venue was full-sized. In a brilliant surprise move, Rafael came back on stage and completed his talk despite injury and pain medication. A standing ovation showed our huge appreciation of the work he'd presented and the resilience and humour with which he presented it.

I stumble to try and capture in this post how exceptional this event and its organisers and participants are. I haven't even touched on the conversations between the programming which are as good or even better. For me, and many others, Eyeo does an incredible job of energising and focusing my ideas on what it means to be in creative tech right now.