

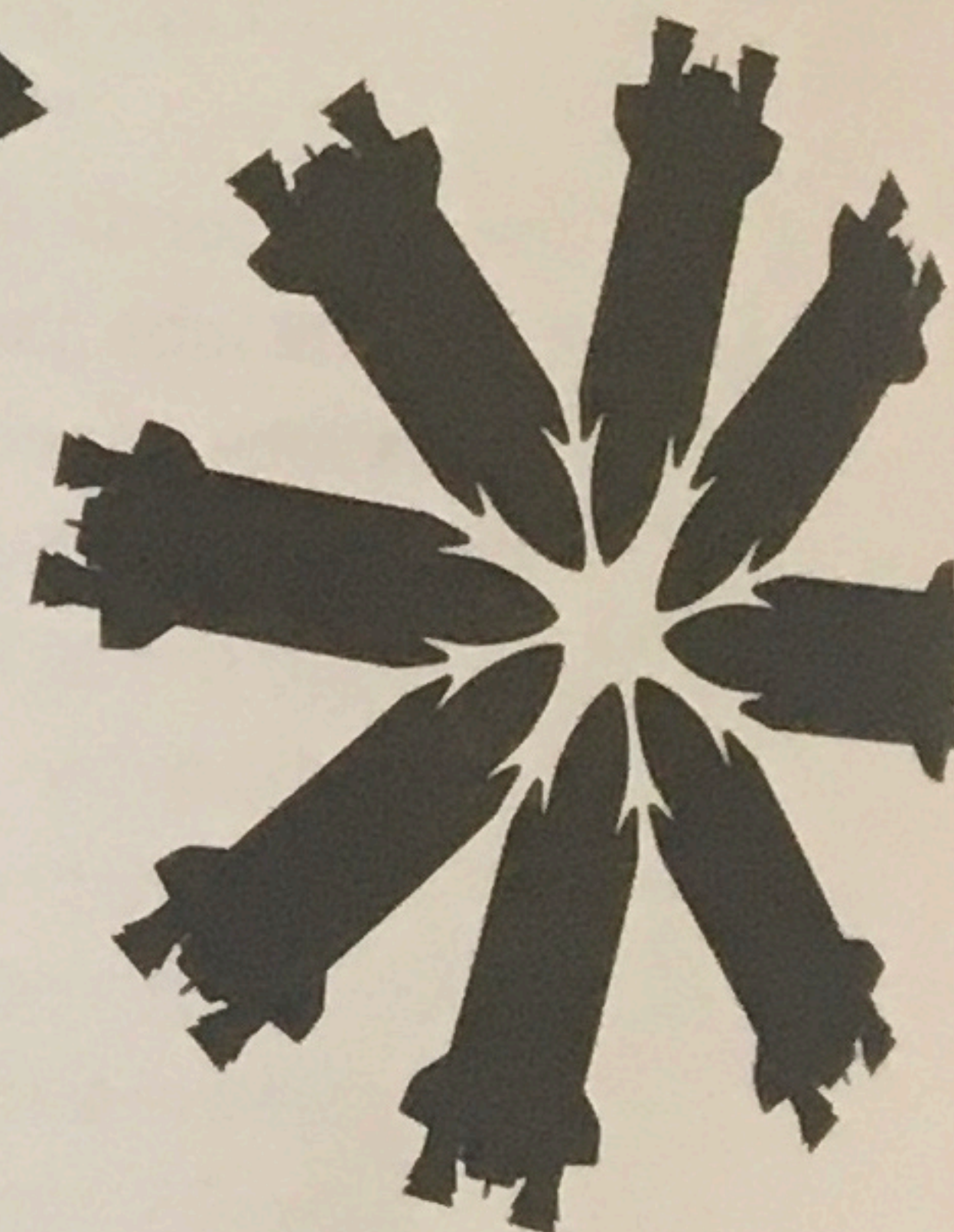
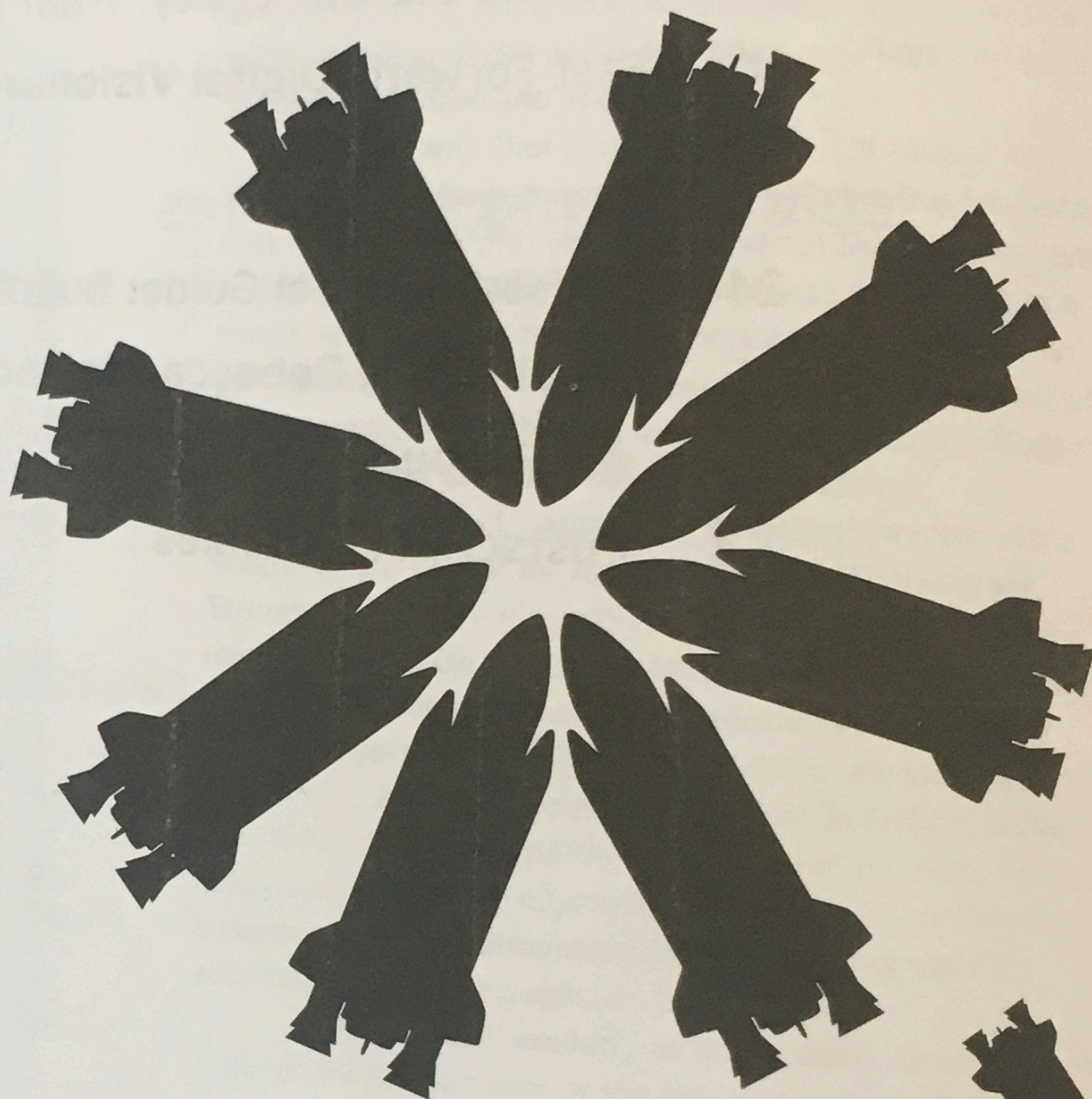
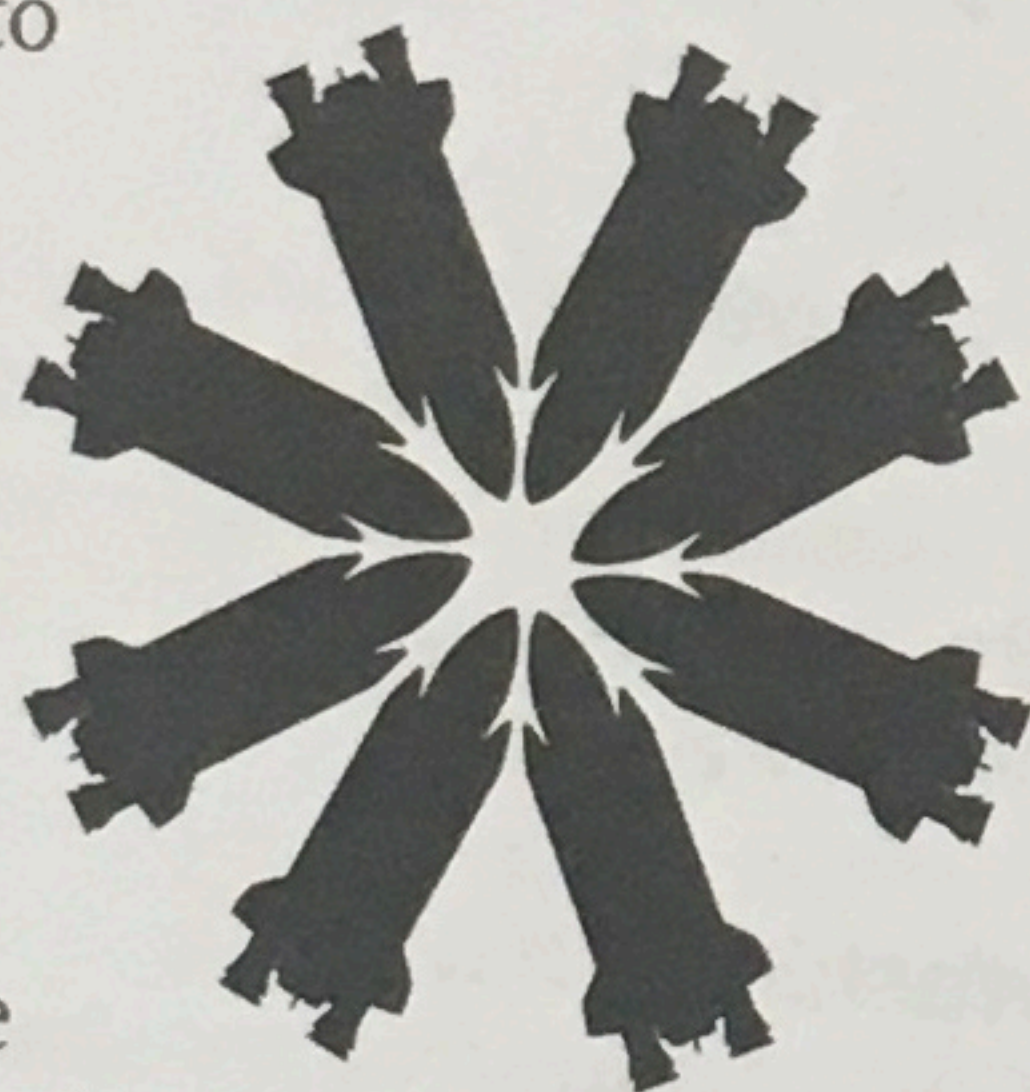
# \* *THE CYBERSPACE RACE*

**Fine art stands to benefit from more technological applications, but imagination shouldn't go undervalued just because its presence is intrinsic and imperceptible.**

by Sue Spaid

Just as the heightened demand for readily applicable business and communication educations has diminished the role of the liberal arts education, the advent of the techno-arts (technology-based design fields such as telerobotics, virtual reality, computer graphics, electronic media, information arts, etc.) has overshadowed the significance of a fine arts education. While the commercial reality of techno-art still lures corporate sponsorship, National Science Foundation grants, state budgets and students, corporations are beginning to realize how imagination, a fine arts emphasis, is tantamount to knowing how to operate existing computer-aided design systems. Nonetheless, techno-art departments tend to wield a greater influence over administrators who correlate budget allocation with economic payoff, professional prominence, and greater research costs.

Such formulas for resource allocation prove how misunderstood and undervalued the goals of fine arts are vis-à-vis techno-arts. Interesting fine artists tend to pose unfamiliar experiences or images that offer implications beyond their extrinsic value. Like the thought experiments of theoretical physics, fine artists often propose phenomena that are ineffable and sometimes remain unrealizable for 50 years. Nothing could seem more like current digital imagery than Roberto Matta's exploding and imploding paintings dating back to the '30s. And Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's 1946 painting of boundless space occurring simultaneously in multiple grids suggests an early visual model of cyberspace. While the techno-arts tend to focus on technology's ability to represent or actualize known phenomena more efficiently (mass production, speed, wider accessibility), a fine arts education engenders what environmental studies professor David Orr terms "slow knowledge"—patience



and thoroughness. Yet a measurable fast knowledge garners funding. (Jon Spayde, "Learning in the Key of Life," *Utne Reader*, May/June 1998, p. 47).

And so the stage is set for the age-old debate concerning the value of a college education. Should students learn skills that directly equip them for the job market, or should they gain a broad-based education that teaches them how to think and learn, so that they can adapt as employment opportunities ebb and flow over their lifetime? Canadian historian and critic John Ralston Saul argues that "technical training is training in what is sure to be obsolete soon anyway; it's self-defeating, and it won't get you through the next 60 years of your life." (Spayde, "Learning," p. 47) It is the unnatural separation of the techno-arts from fine arts that makes such a discussion possible. Further, it's fascinating how many colleges offer techno-art degrees, but no fine arts degree—which concedes the new hegemony.

While the application of technology often raises new kinds of moral dilemmas, this added complexity is

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Untitled*, 1946, oil on canvas, 38" x 30 1/4" (photo courtesy of Sue Spaid).



secondary to the techno-artist's interest in overcoming technical barriers. By contrast, critical thinking, whereby students are taught how to anticipate and resolve the moral consequences of human action, is a fine arts requisite. For this reason, fine artists are often dismayed by the "I'm not responsible, I'm just an artist" attitude of many techno-artists. Such an uncritical view unfortunately recalls Leni Riefenstahl's inexcusable disposition regarding her films' complicity with Nazi propaganda. Like many of today's techno-artists, Riefenstahl was seduced by the allure and challenge of sexy unfamiliar technologies. Given the fact that most computer technology was either designed in tandem with the military industrial complex or has vast military applications, it's equally alarming how rarely the potential danger of the techno-arts is openly discussed.

By comparison to the excitement exuded by today's techno-arts, the fine arts career seems rather anachronistic and masochistic, some bizarre holdover from a 19th century Romantic conception of the lonely artist

who opts to pursue one of the world's most difficult, painful and risky professions, as he or she physically confronts his or her culture, identity, and personal security. People presume that fine artists are born different, which is why they're more sensitive, impractical, and compassionate—as if one could remain so immune from one's culture. Rather, the fine arts education's emphasis on critique and self-reflection plays a huge part in shaping that seemingly natural disposition. The fine arts education seeks to sensitize art students and make them fully conscious of their fragile relationship to society, while the techno-arts education prepares students for the competitive arena of the workplace, where students must overcome human vulnerability. Evidently, the discourse, structure, and spectacle of contemporary scientific research have had a greater influence on the techno-arts than fine arts. As a result, techno-artists erroneously conflate culture and art, communication arts and fine arts, advertising (media exploitation) and art (media invention/critique), design and beauty, computer-based art and electronic art, biology and anthropology, results-oriented schemes and accidental discovery, and sometimes, machines and humans.

While the techno-arts are practiced differently than the fine arts, the differences are often conveniently disguised. For example, the notion of "information arts" is a misleading juxtaposition of terms. Such a term accepts the art form inherent in making information accessible, but fails to acknowledge that "art" dispenses unforeseen questions, not statements of fact. In the midst of global information, the novelty of a particular cultural experience becomes eclipsed as its original context is made invisible, which is why so many international fine artists opt to explore local issues, perhaps the last vestige of difference.

The fine arts command an active body's engagement with a material experience, rather than lend credence to aesthetic experiences strung from slide lectures, art magazines, and art historical texts. With the exception of the vast applications for electronic media (light, sound, and digital imagery), the techno-art experience is fully shaped by mediating machines. A computer's role in translating an experience, the limitation of viable options, the presence of surrogates, the intangibility of the immaterial, and the over-all emphasis on vision contribute to techno-art's inevitable mediation or distortion of an otherwise subjective experience. A fine artist's physical presence, meanwhile, makes it difficult to hedge risks, feign intimacy, or claim irresponsibility (anonymity). Both approaches often propagate by-products beyond the creator's control, but the evasive nature of mediated and immaterial forms looms larger.

**Sue Spaid** is an independent curator who teaches at Otis College of Art and Art Center College of Design in the Los Angeles vicinity.

