The Tree Whispers Hudson
An installation by Mark Bernard for the 2009 Kingston Sculpture Biennial

Artist's Concept

The participant walks from a wooded area into a clearing. They hear a voice calling out to them in a whisper. *"Hello? Hello? Why don't you come over here?"* The person pauses, confused. After a few seconds, the voice calls out louder, *"Please come over here, to the tree."* The fallen, heavily rotten tree encourages further involvement as the participant cautiously approaches.

"Thanks for coming over. I'm just a fallen tree trunk, but I'm here to tell you about the river. There's so much local beauty, and many fascinating tales of human exploration and development."

Through a database of man made and natural history, *The Tree Whispers Hudson* acts as an understated information kiosk, and a curiosity that combines rotting organic matter with computer technology.

Artist's Statement

The theme of the 2009 Sculpture Biennial challenged my usual direction of integrating of computer technology into my art. How could I reconcile using electronic equipment in a natural environment, when the theme is "*Go Green and Keep the Hudson Clean?*"

As a culture, we are perpetually distracted by technology, I believe to an obsessive level. I'm beginning to feel that contemporary technology is almost specifically designed to pull us away from our connection to our natural environment, and from our bond with our friends and community. Computers and the internet keep us inside our homes, rather than physically interacting with our friends and nature. Even when we leave the house, cell phones keep us from being present and connected when we're outside in the world.

I sought to completely hide the technology, and generally downplay its presence. I did not want any equipment to become the focus of the piece. Rather, technology would be employed to instill a certain intelligence and soul into a piece of wood. This would hopefully keep the audience's attention on the beauty of the Hudson River and its surrounding natural setting. In using a computer to facilitate a broadening of a human being's attention to their environment, I intend to suggest that it is not the technology that is at fault here, but rather our preoccupation and escapist tendencies that have placed a wedge between ourselves and our natural and social environments.

Implementation and Site

The materials used include a found decaying tree; with a hidden low power computer; custom circuitry; an assortment of discretely-placed sensors; and a remotely located solar panel and battery system for grid independence.

The installation and the information conveyed by the tree's voice are very site-specific. The artist has researched the area's natural and human history, and built a voice database from that information.

About the Artist

Mark Bernard is a computer and mechanical engineer living in Rosendale, NY, just south of Kingston. He has worked on numerous art and commercial projects since he was 17. Mark created a system that interprets a pianist's playing and in turn plays accompaniment on two other player pianos. He developed industrial robots that built and tuned Woodstock Percussion wind chimes, and has offered technical services to many area artists since the early 80s. Mark collaborated with artist Carolyn Lambert for the 2005 Kingston Sculpture Biennial, creating the surrealistic video surveillance installation *The Camera Had a Nervous Twitch.*

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Speaker

Microphone

Computer

RF Motion Sensor
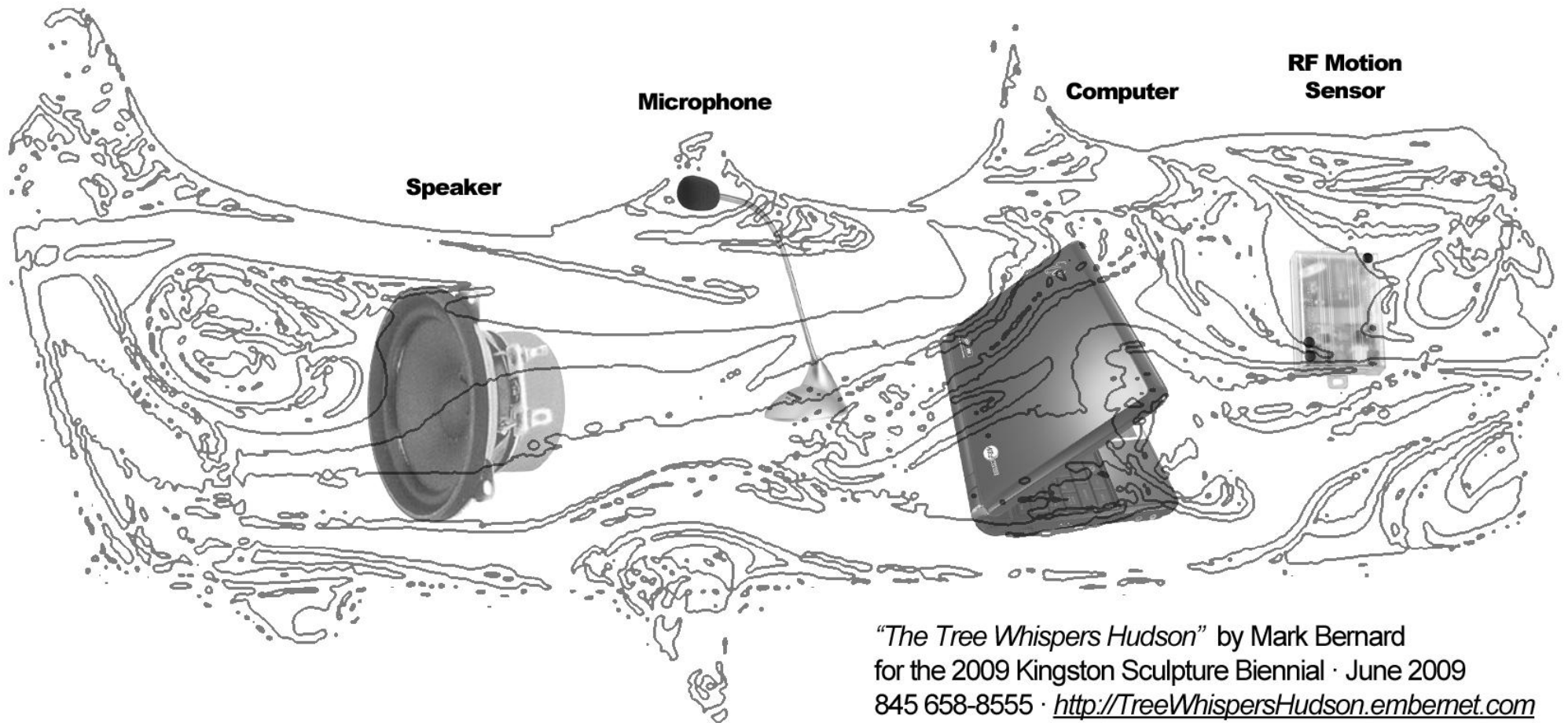
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