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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

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DEPT. OF INVENTION INCOMPREHENSIBLE

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The motto of dorkbot, a group that holds meetings once a month in Manhattan, except in the summer, and in fourteen other cities, including Sofia, Bulgaria, and Mumbai, India, is "People doing strange things with electricity." At a dorkbot meeting in San Francisco, a speaker presented a design for two twelve-story towers. By means of a generator called a Tesla coil, the towers would produce lightning bolts as long as three hundred feet, which, a colleague said, was desirable, because "real lightning, which is very rarely seen up close, has the ability to focus and clear the mind." At another meeting, a talk titled "Fire-Spewing Vacuum Cleaners" described a project involving vacuum cleaners fuelled with propane. The speaker called his next endeavor "Things That Might Fly If You Put Enough Rockets on Them."

Dorkbot was founded by a young man named Douglas Repetto, who teaches computer music at Columbia. "The idea of dorkbot was to reach people who had nowhere to talk about these projects," Repetto says. "Some might appear in a gallery, perhaps, but many are too odd, or they're unfinished, or it's not even clear what they are." Dorkbot presentations typically feature novel ways of using electrical devices, especially uses that don't require much money. "Dorkbot is about what you can do on the cheap in a back room somewhere," he says. The name encourages humility.

Dorkbot meetings are usually held near Columbia, but the May meeting was in SoHo. The room was large, with high ceilings and white walls and columns. About eighty people in folding chairs faced a table on which there were three laptop computers. On the wall was a projection of a grid of colors, which were flashing. A man tried to make the grid disappear. Repetto, who shaves his head and has an athletic build, said, "We'll get started in a minute. We're just trying to solve some technical problems." Then he took photographs of the audience.

The first presenter was a tall man named Spot Draves, whose presentation concerned his Web site, Electric Sheep, on which abstract images constantly change form, in response to information coming

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this week's talk

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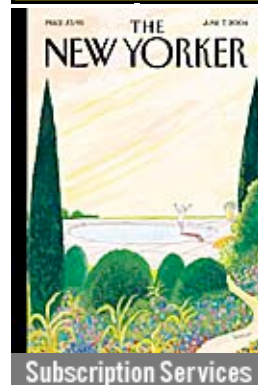
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from other people's computers via the Internet. Draves is tall and bald and diffident. "I'm not a big public speaker," he said. "So I did the program at home, alone, in the dark, which is how I'm most comfortable, and I'm going to play that." Swirling colors appeared on the wall, and Draves was heard saying mildly, "The project started in '99. It was based on an algorithm developed in 1992. The title is based on the novel 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?,' by Philip K. Dick." Draves also said that it represented "the collective dream of sleeping computers all over the Internet." Now and then he would place his hands at his sides and gather his pant legs, which made his cuffs rise, as if he were preparing to cross a stream. At the end of his talk, he held up a disk and said, "Please buy my DVD. I quit my day job to do this."

The second presenter was Rich LeGrand, a young engineer who had built a small robot from Legos. The robot had four wheels and was operated by means of a Game Boy. It was about the size of a big crab—it looked like a device a space probe would place on the surface of a planet—and it was capable of a complicated maneuver whereby it rotated at the same time that it moved forward. LeGrand called the maneuver "frisbeeing." "It's questionable whether there's a huge market for this," he said, "but it's fun."

The final presenter, Rob Seward, discussed analyzing Bach chorales according to "the generative theory of tonal music," which, he said, "takes developments in linguistics in the twentieth century and applies them to music." Seward was the only presenter who brought his parents. He is tall and thin, with glasses and a beard. When he stood in front of the screen to point at something, the lines of the music staff lay on his cheeks like war paint.

Dorkbot talks are frequently abstruse. The problem, Repetto says, is that the more deeply a speaker explains "the geekiness of what he's doing, the harder it is to find an audience with a sufficiently broad grasp of the subject to understand." A listener equipped in one discipline is rarely prepared to handle three. "I try to make a meeting fair by having it be incomprehensible in several different fields, instead of just one," Repetto said. "Tonight was incomprehensible art, incomprehensible robots, and incomprehensible music, so everybody was a little bit lost."

— Alec Wilkinson



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