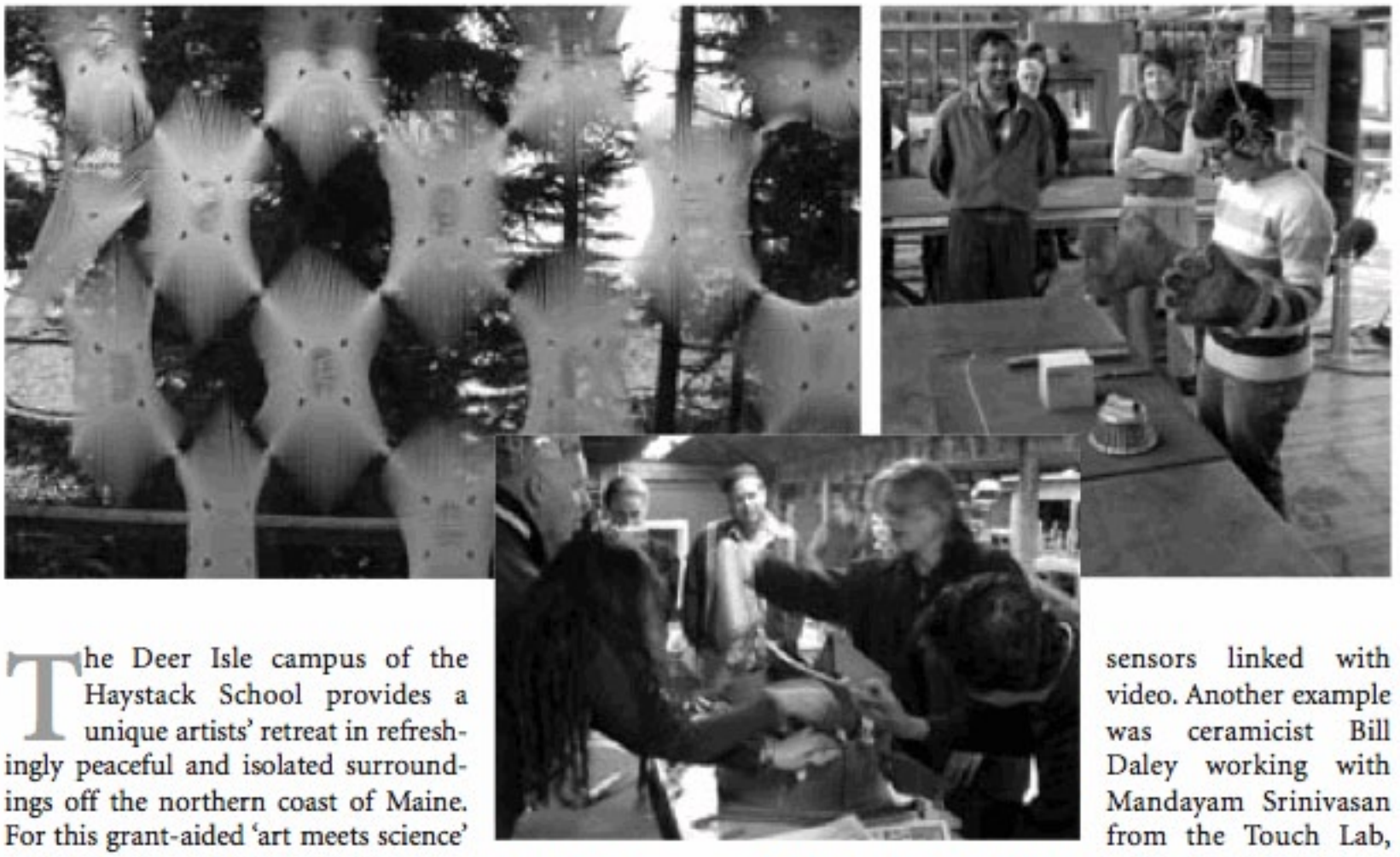
Hybrid Haystack

Autumn 2002 saw an unusual dialogue take place at the world-renowned Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, bringing MIT's Media Lab into a stronghold of craft practice. What happened? ***Chris Rose*** *was there*



all photos Chris Rose

The Deer Isle campus of the Haystack School provides a unique artists' retreat in refreshingly peaceful and isolated surroundings off the northern coast of Maine. For this grant-aided 'art meets science' one-off event, which was two years in planning, an unusually comprehensive range of practitioners, researchers, teachers, writers and research students were invited to share insights into how we work with our hands, the language we use to appreciate the phenomena involved, and the assumptions we tend to make in the process. The four-day event developed into a dialogue around aesthetics, technology, experience, craft, knowledge and expression. Studio work with ceramics, metal, paper, wood and fibres was brought together with digital media such as fibre-optics, microcomputers, computer controlled etching, video imaging, motion sensing and virtual control systems.

Unlike a conference format, the symposium was creatively organised around a collection of materials workshop projects, each of which was instigated by an artist/scientist pairing, each workshop attempting to create hybrid projects that could draw in participants or provide unforeseen examples of collaborative process. One example of this approach was blacksmith Tom Joyce working with Justine Cassell from the Gesture and Narrative Language Group from the Media Lab, who together fabricated a forged sculpture that retained and replayed 'memories' of the stages of its making process through sound and motion sensors linked with video. Another example was ceramicist Bill Daley working with Mandayam Srinivasan from the Touch Lab, who despite his knowledge with virtual interface design for remote surgical technology, experienced for the first time the design, and making by hand, a ceramic vessel using Bill's method of prototyping forms with heavy tarpaper. These very physical arenas gave powerful departure points for the dialogues, which while being rooted in complex experience, quickly extended to the challenges of our understanding of the hand in apparently disparate fields.

To give the event some shape and to draw all of the 60-odd participants together periodically, a number of short presentations were made to explore defined or specialised areas of interest, and it's worth listing these here to give a flavour of the scope of the event, and to set the scene for another difficult challenge addressed by one of the research projects: that of capturing or providing access to everything that happens at complex meetings.

Hiroshi Ishi from the Tangible Media Group presented a range of research work relating to hands and interfaces, referring to the 'Tangible Bits' exhibition at the ICC centre in Tokyo. These examples showed ways of giving physical form to digital information, such as Curlybot (a small wheeled toy that remembers how and where you move it and can replay your action) and