For nine evenings, in October of 1966, collaborations between engineers and artists resulted in a series of performances that incorporated leading edge technical objects and systems. This series was initiated
by Billy Klüver, a physicist at Bell Telephone Laboratories and artist Robert Rauschenberg. How a Swedish physicist, living and working in the United States, ended up cooperating with an American avant-garde artist in crafting “9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering” is one of the great stories of contemporary art.

Now it is also the subject of an exhibition organized by the independent curator Catherine Morris for the List Center for Visual Arts at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which is on view from May 4th -July 9th, 2006. It will give viewers the opportunity to study primary source materials, texts, drawings and subjects of the exhibition “9 Evenings Reconsidered: Art, Theatre and Engineering, 1966” photographs, slides and documentaries on this watershed moment in recent art. Drawn to “alternative and collaborative practices of the late 60s and 70s” Morris began exploring “9 Evenings” when she realized the 40-year anniversary of it was getting close.

For anyone interested in the beginnings of the intersections between art and technology, “9 Evenings” is arguably the focal event of this new renaissance. Its roots go back to the early 60s when visual artists, dancers and composers became increasingly interested in using new technology and new technical materials.

Klüver collaborated with contemporary artists Jean Tinguely, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Yvonne Rainer and John Cage among others, in providing technical solutions for their ideas. In 1965 Klüver was approached by a Swedish musical organization about bringing in an American group for a festival of dance and music. Rauschenberg and Klüver then invited a group of ten New York artists and 30 engineers from Bell Laboratories to work together on performances that relied on new technology. The group began to hold a series of meetings for artists to connect with the engineers. In addition to Rauschenberg, the artists attending these meetings included the emerging vanguard of the New York art world, including musicians Cage and David Tudor, choreographers Lucinda Childs, Alex Hay, Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer and visual artists Öyvind Fahlström and Robert Whitman, among others. After weeks of brainstorming sessions, the engineers and artists began to work on the practical realities of realizing the works.

The technical elements that the artists and engineers developed seem both challenging and bold such as the use of infrared television, using Doppler sonar to create sound, positioning vacuums to float a person across stage on a platform, immersing the body in Jell-O, snowfall that falls upward, in addition to many, many other expansive concepts. Yet, the most compelling thing about “9 Evenings” audiences is that the ideas which the artists, with the support and assistance of the engineers, realized have become commonplace in contemporary art today. Some of these concepts and materials include broadening the scope of media used for sculpture, incorporating sound into sculpture and painting compositions, making kinetic and dissolving sculptures and incorporating body functions, such as brain waves, into performance and sculpture.

Participation in the Swedish Festival folded but not wanting to abandon all of the energy generated for that festival, the group continued to work. The 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue in lower
Manhattan was secured as the venue for this series of multimedia performances utilizing the new technology. The Armory provided a large space for a substantial number of people and was regarded by the artists as a way to break out of the constraints of the 500-member audience permitted by the Judson Church and other downtown spaces where all of the artists had worked. Thus, “9 Evenings” was born.

These large-scale performance works were an extension of the theater, dance and music performances of the early 1960s but on an even larger-scale. As an example of this work, consider Whitman’s piece Two Holes of Water – 3. Whitman wanted to create immediate recorded and projected images. He had seven cars drive onto the floor of the Armory, each car holding either a film or video projector. Several closed circuit television cameras were simultaneously recording simple actions, such as a woman typing, a person pouring water and two women moving in front of curved mirrors. A small fiber-optic camera recorded the inside of a coat pocket. These images, as well as over the air television images, were sent to the video projectors in the cars and were projected on the large white screen stretched across the whole length of the Armory. Films both, found and shot by Whitman were also projected from the cars. Additionally, microphones picked up the sounds from the exhaust on the cars, while an anti-war speech was broadcast at a very high volume.

The emphasis on the role of the engineer and the importance of the collaboration between two equal professionals was at the heart of “9 Evenings” and E.A.T.’s birth and growth. “9 Evenings” got extensive press coverage and attracted many artists to thinking about incorporating technology into their art. Klüver, Rauschenberg, Whitman and Fred Waldhauer, one of the engineers, decided to organize a way for artists to have access to new technology for their work. They created a not-for-profit service organization which their lawyer labeled Experiments in Art and Technology, when he incorporated the foundation. The group knew that artists don’t create experiments but the name stuck and the organization quickly became known as E.A.T.

The exhibition at MIT is the first of its kind, since “9 Evenings” has never been the subject of an exhibition before. Morris remarks “as an historical event I believe “9 Evenings” will resonate for contemporary audiences for several reasons. First, the current interest in adapting available technologies to art making practices should prompt interest in this early attempt to do the same. Second, the artists involved in this project were an extraordinary group.” She has organized the exhibition as straightforward as possible to permit the documents and text to tell the story. Much of the film footage has not been shown in public. The exhibition catalogue will be distributed by D.A.P and will include an introductory essay by Morris and two additional essays, by Michelle Yi-Ann Kuo and Clarice Bardiot, two historical reviews, by Lucy Lippard and Brian O’Doherty and an interview with Herb Schneider, one of the participating engineers.

9 Evenings: Theater and Engineering crystallized a moment of solidarity in the art world, between collaborators interested in the possibilities that technology offered artists. Klüver perhaps said it best in the introduction to the catalogue for the series, “technology has, I believe, vast untapped possibilities to give pleasure and to make life more enjoyable. The Chinese fireworks 3,000 years ago were maybe the
first use of advanced technology to give poetry, mystery and pleasure. I feel that our “9 Evenings” performances will have some affinity to these long forgotten fireworks.”