

► WRITER PAULINA BORSOOK IS ALLERGIC TO NEW PAINT, electronics, plastics, rubber, and most else derived from petroleum. Her condition is called Environmental Illness/Multiple Chemical Sensitivity, and by some estimates affects some 15 percent of Americans, to varying degrees. For Borsook, it means that her writing on technology and culture must be done on computers whose plastics and wiring are not quite modern enough to contain the chemical compounds that for example, make her nauseous, give her hives and make it difficult for her to breathe. The Social Security Administration has recognized MCS as a condition for which disability or worker's compensation may be collected.

You could say it's the disease of Modernism: Environmental Illness/Multiple Chemical Sensitivity, wherein the immune system has cried havoc with all the carcinogens, mutagens, and simply bad Toxic crap that we and the birds and fishes and charismatic megafauna must needs now swim in, is the terminal diagnosis for our Era—and its end. Reacting to the volatile petrochemicals in fresh paint, new cars, shampooed carpets, new housing, is simply the body's synecdoche of saying "the world is too much with me," with us all. And isn't trying to cope with the present overwhelmingness of the world (it was World War I, the first technological war, that lead to "The Waste Land") what the elegant bleakness of Modernism is about? Becoming sickened simply through the state of what the world has become says that the world has become, at some level, sickening for everyone. Disease as metaphor, pace Susan Sontag.

EI/MCS is the Post-Modern disease, too, for it carries within it its own self-referential paradoxes. For many of us who are disabled by EI/MCS (and the flux of technology it's emblematic of), technology plays the Double. While new electronics and new wiring are among the things that set me off the most, the ability to work at home using an outgassed computer, in the environment I can most try to keep safe—has made technology my best hospice-worker. Rather like a knocked-around child who must still rely on her battering mother for food and shelter, so technology has made it possible for me to support myself, have contact with others (over phone or email), and receive some validation of self—during the years I was housebound with my chronic illness. I could not drive; I could seldom travel; I was too sick, in body and spirit, to consider sex. But I could make a living, and feel the presence of Concerned Others, through my ancient laptop on the floor and my 2.4 kbit/s pocket modem. It was about the only thing that kept me going.

For the cheap theatric pomo irony is, I have made my living for years writing about computers and communications, and purely through an accident of

Paulina Borsook was on staff at Data Communications magazine for five years and on the masthead of Wired for four.

synchronicity, about the third time my immune system crashed in my adult life was about the same time I began making known some of my it-aint-necessarily-so opinions about the wonders of these technologies.

Which added a palimpsest-layer to the après-moi-le-deluge/fire-next-time margins that surround my EI/MCS: in addition to the skepticism that practically always greets the self-outing of my allergy to the (late) 20th century, doubters also apply movie-of-the-week psychoanalysis. Not only must I be a hysterical female who's feigning illness to get attention, I must also be expressing my rage at technology by saying it makes me sick. And because I am a feminist, there's the additional gender dismissal: since technology is so clearly male, I must be expressing my bad feelings

SICK OF IT ALL

Industrial disease

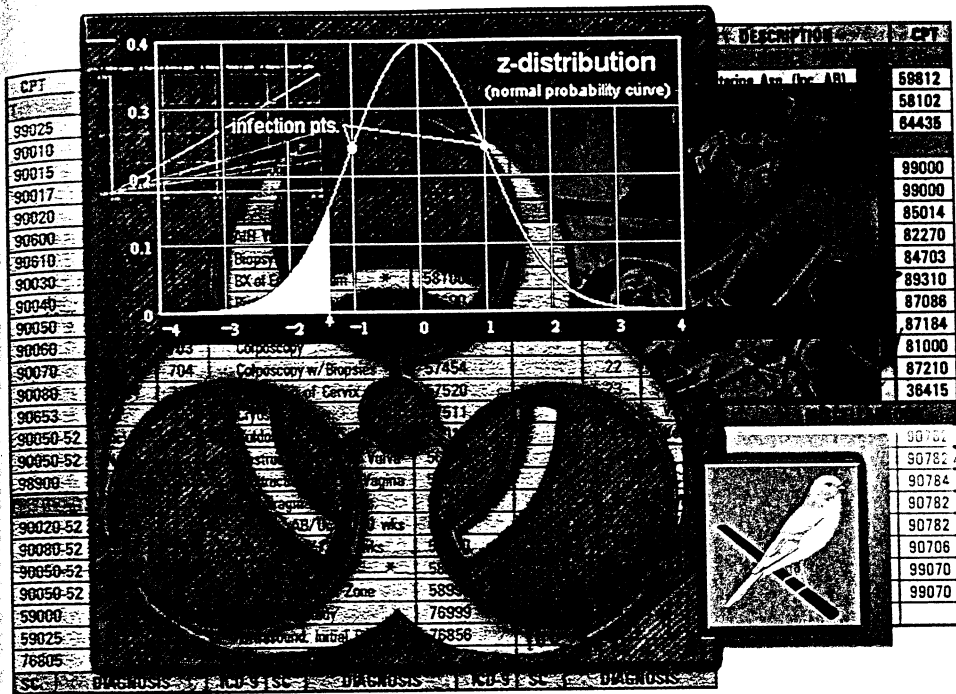
BY PAULINA BORSOOK

about boys.

To which I can only say, it's evidence of how little biological memes (meme = bad idea whose time has come, notion of ideas + mindsets spreading out into the world such as virii do, the homage digital-culture blabbers pay to evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, and to William Burroughs), no matter how seemingly trendy they have become in high-tech, have really replaced mechanical ones, in understanding how the world works.

That relations between mind and body, individual and group (I am just that much more sensitive than the average bear, is all. But the teratogenic emissions coming off the new dry wall in your condo or your laser printer, that close up my throat, are no good for you either, no matter that the effects might not be felt

A Freewoman, Whose Health Is Radically Impaired By The By-Products of Our Glorious Post-Industrial Information-Age Way Of Life, Muses, Marmot-Style, On How Her Condition And Her Relations With The Technosphere, All Resemble Each Other.



self-hatred implied in the body turned against itself.

EI/MCS makes a commentary on the narrative of *This Modern Life*, for it demonstrates another aspect of the hegemony of Moore's Law. Most folks don't ever think to fix their electronics when they break: buy another one, of whatever it is! New models and tweaks and upgrades and feature-mixes are called a grand cycle of continuous improvement, and ain't it wonderful the ever-widening functions it seems you are being enabled to perform. But I can't tolerate new electronics, and I panic every time something goes wrong with my wrung-out computer gear. Can the technician find an outgassed replacement component or old cable he's had lying

til 20 years down the line in your alveoli), Self and Other. Technology is just dandy, but it doesn't resolve the problem really of how we relate to the world outside. I simply happen to have a condition that situates the problem in a way that's overdetermined; less a canary in the mine than a reminder that there's so much we don't know, don't understand, can't resolve about who we are inside our prisonhouse of Self (the coporeal one, in my case)—and how to connect that Self to the world beyond.

Cross-validation isn't easy for anyone, only some of us know it more than others. Web surfing and intelligent agents still won't tell us everything we want to know; and my illness is a slight glitch, that bespeaks the notion that most things in life are irreducibly complex beyond the way any computer program can model them. EI/MCS says input/output transactions aren't necessarily orderly, or bug-free.

There's a bit of truth in the not-so-subtle accusations guys make about EI/MCs, in that it's a disease, like most auto-immune disorders, that strikes women far more than men. Between our more complex hormonal natures, the estrogenic qualities of some of the worst of the chlorinated hydrocarbons unavoidable in air and water everywhere (women have far more, and far more receptive, sites in the body that expect to bind to estrogen/estrogen-mimicking compounds), and the higher fat-contents of our bodies (the bad stuff is fat-soluble)—the effects of technology in the grand sense (the human-made, as opposed to natural, universe) can be far harsher for women than for men. And who knows, maybe the implicit misogyny of a male-dominated culture leads in some wacked-out way to the

around for some reason? Will alcohol (maybe the only solvent I can tolerate) degum whatever's gummed up? For it's not just a simple matter of finding reliable used stuff: it really has to be reliable, because chances are I won't be able to tolerate any repairs or upgrades it might need. It took me a year to find a reliable replacement desktop machine—and a friend who I could trade a new multimedia upgrade kit for his year's-old aged one. He now has the better, newer technology on his Pentium, but at least I was fortunate enough to find a way to upgrade my workstation so it's state of the art—as of two years ago. I've taken to hoarding obsolete stuff that I think might work (two 10-year-old portable printers, one 10-year-old desktop printer, two 10-year-old laptops, cables, a 14.4 kbit/s modem).

EI/MCS gives working proof for the Stockholm Syndrome, identifying with your captor through the prolonged intimacy and some givingness he provides. It's also a fine example of Foucaultian power relations as enacted on the body, where the ways my immune system has been colonized by the poisons of the dominant hierarchy creates a clear pattern of signs and signifiers: I get dry heaves (given over a transgressive powerlessness) after spending too much time in a Circuit City. I Do Theory i.e., try to figure out what's setting me off, every time I have an unexplained Bad Reaction (oh, I get it, it's the baseboard heat in a friend's loft, not her network of computers, for they are all six months from the factory). And EI/MCS sure as hell makes me self-conscious, about the prices we pay for the structure of how we live today. ☐

ILLUSTRATION BY TORI ORR