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## Interview With David Hanson, Robot Builder, Disturbathon Creator

Oct 30th 2009 10:03AM  
By Corn Mo

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David Hanson is the founder/CEO of [Hanson Robotics](#). You may have seen his work as he has garnered attention first with a robot head of his wife, Amanda; then an Einstein robot head that was married to the body of a Hubo robot (pictured) and then with his conversational Philip K. Dick robot. All of these are emotional recognition robots and include his invention of a robot skin called Frubber.

Before robotics, David was interested in making the perfect party. He created a system that would gauge the level of a party's energy by increasing the volume of music when the noise level of the party decreased. When the noise level of the people increased, the volume of the music would decrease. He also created Bliss Krieg, a party in the mid 90's that included a "Garden of Eden", complete with waterslide that ended into a makeshift pool. [John Freeman](#), of the [Dooms UK](#) (an art rock band we were in), christened the pool from the slide into an immediate crash that sent a flood out of the front door, carrying props and art work much like the [flood from a Universal Studios tour](#).

The biggest party that became an annual Halloween event was the Disturbathon. I [played](#) one of the Disturbathons wherein I was told to watch where I set my equipment on the stage due to some bodily fluids that had been left by the previous act. Luckily, all I received on my amp and accordion case was mud.

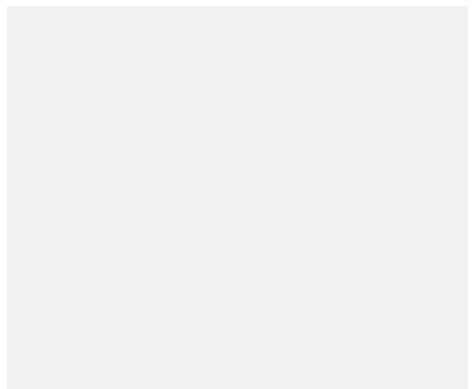
Here is an interview with David Hanson. I removed all of my questions because they were all answered at once and they were answered very poetically, I might add.

David Hanson: I came up with the idea for Disturbathon on a mad frenzied road trip to New Orleans with my friend Erik Hosek, in late September 1989. Upon my return, I would build the first Disturbathon in my place, single-handedly (almost, my girlfriend Julie Hargis helped some). I was a sophomore at UNT, living in an off-campus apartment by the IOOF cemetery, studying math but instead of going to class, I had been madly creating—transforming my apartment into a jungle (with live crocodile, pythons, eels, parrots, insects, and rolling terraces of plants and sod and waterfall), writing poetry, music, endlessly sketching, and hammering on my screenplay *Old Scratch Meets the Cheerleaders*. One Thursday afternoon my friend Eric Hosek (a brilliant bug-eyed lunatic who emulated Burroughs and Thompson) dropped in. He invited me to skip school to hit the road in his grandad's Fleetwood Brougham, to visit our chum Forrest Jackson who just started at Tulane. It didn't take much to convince me.



The trip was iconically spooky. The air was brisk, clawing at the prow of the car with spectral fingers of fog. The lonely bayou highway, the Spanish moss-swallowed truckstops, dead crooners moaning out from the a.m. radio, the caffeine o.d.--all these fueled our logorhea, and my ideas spewing hot and fresh in my notebook of poetry, ideas and drawings.

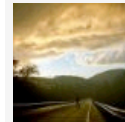
The idea for Disturbathon popped out in those late hours on



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Louisiana Highway 190, among the frenzy of other ideas. The name Disturbathon came a couple of days later, in New Orleans, but on that old pirate highway, the idea for Disturbathon hit me like tinnitus ringing: a psychoactive themed environment, squishy and sexy--a party wherein you playfully pass through maws of horror. My thoughts reeled: if it could be built right, this could be a Halloween-themed immersion that makes fun of all that it taboo, but embraces it, makes love to it, digests and poops out the false fears, but reinforces understanding of all that is truly wrong and what's right too. I felt that this sort of thing disorient could spawn mad creative explosions of ideas and behavior. Halloween theming was perfect!

I thought that the idea could really take root and might result in a major new form of expression/art/ritual if it was built properly. I described the idea to Eric, who was vaguely positive but seemed excited. When we crept into the Tulane dorms that night, I described the idea to Forrest, and he said it sounded great but that I would never pull it off. After some argument, he said begrudgingly challenged me to pleasantly surprise him. Later that night, one of us coined the term "Disturbathon" in reference to the event. I think it was me, but Forrest says it may have been him. I don't know. Memory is slippery.

In any case, his challenge motivated me. When I returned to Denton, I began feverishly rebuilding my apartment in a spooky theme. I hung spider webs, drippy black plastic, and "designated fornication spot" signs around the apartment (above the linen cabinet, in the bathtub, above the cupboard). I dubbed hermaphrodite porn and spooky movies from the local video store. I made the first Disturbathon flyer and distributed them liberally around Denton. The flyer was hand drawn, and the text was so stylized and psychotic that it was practically illegible, more frequently interpreted as "Disturbation".

My local friends, including [Ean Schuessler](#), thought I was insane already, and mildly encouraged my frenzy, but more explicitly mocked me. But everyone agreed to attend. I set the party at 5 days in length, figuring that a slow build would mean a more intense crescendo.

My roommate at the time was a conservative Christian, a mild-mannered athlete studying mechanical engineering. He had spent increasingly more time at his girlfriend's apartment as I built my jungle and grew more strange. About three days before the party, he showed up in the apartment with one of the flyers in his hand, his face turning kind of purple. I suddenly realized I forgot to tell him about the party. He blew his top, but by the end of the conversation he agreed that the party was OK as a one time thing. After the confrontation, I didn't see much of him, and it was always awkward.

In the end, the party was a success, though not to the magnitude that I hoped. A couple of hundred people came, but the only mad hijinks busted were my own. My girl and I were the sole soilers of the designated fornication spots, but I do think I hit every one of them (some I hit solo though I must admit, which doesn't count really I know). It was a bold experiment, but I knew it had a long way to go to reach the fury of the original vision.

The next year, though, the frolics really busted out. The self same Eric Hosek offered up his grandparent's house for Disturbathon in Oak Cliff. His grandmother had died a few years before, and his granddad just left for the retirement home, with Alzheimers. Eric's dad owned and ran a bank in Tyler, so he assigned Eric with the task of remodeling. Eric's first step was to energize the soul of the house with some righteous frolicking. I took almost two weeks off school, and began remaking the interior of the house, but leaving all the 1950s Blue Velvet vibe, the dusty old magazines from the 1960s, the trophies, the original upholstery and furniture and carpet from ages past. I hung a labyrinth that split the sections of the house up, so that it was impossible to remain oriented. I made 100 gallons of jello on the old gas burners, chilled in the 1950 icebox. I wired a VCR into the old Magnavox TV, so we could watch the hermaphrodite porn and other visual goodies. I marked the designated fornication spots.

About 4 days before the party, Ean dropped in for a skeptical looksee. He was inspired to see the progress, and began to pitch in. John Freeman, Jeff Crye and a few others also saw what it was and began to contribute. Ean and I tossed together a new flyer, and distributed it around the gutter punks and other homeless in Deep Ellum. This one was shaping up right.

The evening of the party, Eric rolled back into town from Lake Tawakoni, with my dead crocodile, frozen. He dropped it off on the all you can eat pig flesh buffet, among the goat heads and pile of bacon and cream corn, and began to shuttle homeless people to the party from Deep Ellum. The momentum was gathering nicely.

The people made the party the second year. Ean, John, Eli Jones, Jeff Crye, and many others, and I made a difference too. All that work on the environment really brought the best (of the worst) in people. Only with the right brains could the play really be like transformative and new. That's the idea--to blast the scales off the eyes, to purge the dogmas of their falsehood, and unleash the wonder and uncertainty of life.

One's own playfulness and exploration in the valley of nonsense is the most incinerating transformative tonic, but just watching others has the effect too. Playing off of their words and crazy deeds, catalyzes one's own.

By violating the taboos and surviving, and not hurting ourselves or anyone in the process, by having FUN with it, we prove that the universe remains surprising and undiscovered.

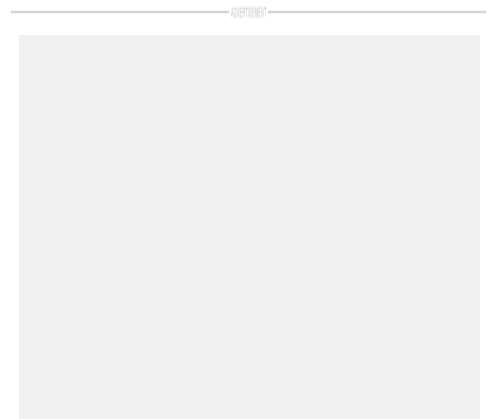
My favorite Disturbathon was the one a Salah Boukadoum's house--big luscious mud pit, giant pumpkin slime pit, great architecture, and mega-playful grotesquerie.

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— By Ean Schuessler

Neutral   

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Posted on Nov 4th 2009  
— By M

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