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This bikini will give you a jolt

By *John E. Mitchell, North Adams Transcript*
 Article Launched: 09/13/2007 12:02:25 PM EDT

Thursday, September 13

ADAMS — Specialty bikinis have long been of interest to Americans. In the 1960s, movies like "The Ghost in the Invisible Bikini," "Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine" and "How to Stuff a Wild Bikini" fueled the dreams of swimwear visionaries everywhere. These days, however, a contemporary artist has used technology to get the ball rolling again.

A recent New York University graduate in the Interactive Technologies program, Andrew Schneider created a solar-powered bikini for the ITP Winter show. The idea is that the bikini will soak up rays even as the girl wearing it does and the power from that activity can be used to recharge her iPod while at the beach.

Schneider started the project with a different purpose and much larger ideas formed in a sustainable energy class that barely held his interest while signing up for it, but seized his attention when all the students were asked what their goals and interest in the subject were.

"I was really very excited by what everyone was saying about changing our energy habits," said Schneider, "changing habits on a very local level to see what we can do to effect relative change — but I leaned over to my

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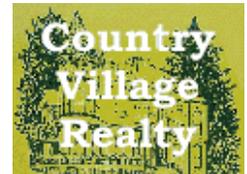
Artist Andrew Schneider has created a bikini that can recharge an iPod.

Submitted...

buddy and said something like 'I'm going to make a bikini that cools your beer.' We laughed about it and I realized half way through the semester that I could."

The beer cooler was downgraded to iPod

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charger for technical reasons — a bikini, frankly, did not have enough surface area to apply the required solar tiles to build up the proper energy. Still, Schneider was able to fashion the world's sexiest battery charger.

"It's a luxury item to keep your luxury item sustained," said Schneider.

This wasn't the first wearable gadget that Schneider had created. Though his background was in performance — both experimental and musical theater were more his focus — Schneider wanted to add a technological component to his performance work, partly as an antidote for his self-confessed ignorance and suspicion of technology.

"I was kind of leery about technology and where it was taking us as a society," he said. "We have all these tools for communication, but we should look at what the content of the conversation is and how these tools are affecting it. That's a big thing I tried to focus on there, but a lot of the other stuff was fun stuff that came out of that."

Schneider spent his first year learning the electronic tools of his new trade — first day, all student are taught to program a microchip to make a little LED light blink.

"My head basically exploded, because it was all new to me," said Schneider, "but sometime around second semester, I realized what these tools are for and what I could do with them. From there, it took off."

Schneider's work often examined the interaction between body and circuit. One of his early contraptions used an eye tracker to control a VCR. Schneider would show a video of himself walking — depending on which direction he was heading on the screen, a viewer's eyes would follow him and this would cause the tracker to make the video fast forward or rewind. It was when he took a course called "Wearables of ITT" that he took the biological and the technological and joined them physically.

"I was constantly affixing cameras to my face," said Schneider. "It became a cliché with me, putting screens and cameras on my face and documenting certain habits in life. I made this camera that recorded your mouth and everything you say, but it's only one side of a conversation. It would concatenate everything that you said during your day, to give you a different look into what you were actually saying."

This work lead to his thesis project, "Experimental Devices for Performance," which brought together five wearable gadgets as one showpiece: The Perform-o-shoes, a pair of shoes with matching hat rigged with sensors that control audio, video and lighting according to the performer's moves; the Blinkcam, which takes a photo every time the wearer blinks so he or she can see what they are missing during that blink and recover lost time; Twitchset, a helmet that allows the control of stage lights with arm movements; Facemask, a hat that takes different moving images of right eye, mouth and face; and Prolixus, a set of interactive video mouths that allows wearers to trade the images of each other's mouths on video screens attached to a helmet.

Schneider's irreverence really got attention, however, after he built a better bikini. The first person to take notice was Miss Rhode Island, Allison Rogers, after Schneider had gotten some online attention for his work.

"Her platform for this year's Miss America Pageant was 'go green' or something like that," said Schneider. "She wanted to wear it for the swimsuit competition, so I researched her a little bit. She was smart, very, very smart, so I agreed to loan it to her, but it wasn't going to be allowed to be in the swimsuit competition, you had to have a special sort of swimsuit."

The bikini has been worn by live models on television on a couple occasions, and used in several gallery shows and festivals. In December, it will be making an appearance on the Janice Dick-inson Modeling Experience reality show on Oxygen.

"It even went to Paris for some nude show," said Schneider. "I hardly ever got my hands on

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it, so by the time I finally did see it, it was in rough shape."

Schneider has also gotten a few odd business proposals because of the work. One contractor who sells technical equipment to the military was interested in the beer cooler — also known as iDrink. The Austrian Open tennis tournament invited him to develop a hat equivalent to sell during the event — he didn't take their offer of a booth, but they were so insistent that they offered to man it themselves and forgo the requirement that he do all the sales work.

"Sometimes I have to pretend like I'm an actual company and not just a grad student who made these things," Schneider said.

For Schneider, the entire experience has proven one of the points he wanted to make when he started the project, the idea of sustainability as a hip buzz word. From his vantage point, people were so busy jumping on the green bandwagon as it was being sold as something cool to do that they weren't actually researching the issue — they were just buying into marketing. There are plenty of consumers out there who are willing to do their part to save the world as long as there is a hip item or activity attached to the deed — for instance, something as silly as a solar-powered bikini. Schneider recognized such absurdity in fashioning the beachwear.

"It's always a good thing when people get into the issues," he said, "but unless they really, really know what's going on, it can also be a harmful thing. If people are just blindly saying 'Oh, it's organic' or 'Oh, it's cage free' or whatever the buzz word of the day is that people want to join the bandwagon on — a lot of people don't actually know what they're doing, they just want to do it because they feel good about it."

Schneider has also been able to apply some of the lessons learned from this experience to his performance plans — after all, there has been a performance aspect to the selling of the bikini, dealing with marketers and television people. He's also gotten a clearer picture of the how he can use technology "for both good and evil."

"I have realized that I can make things that are a bit more product oriented," he said, "but use that to get people to look at what I'm actually saying, attract the attention and then say whatever I want to say."

Schneider's plan is to go back to his original idea and pursue the iDrink. To achieve this, he's going to make a male bathing suit counterpart to the bikini. The more generous surface of the male suit will allow for more solar cells, which will in turn be able to generate enough power to cool that brew.

"The iPod's iconic, the bikini's iconic and I think the beer would be a nice compliment," said Schneider.

Andrew Schneider can be found online at andrewjs.com. The solar-powered bikini will be on display at Greylock Arts in Adams beginning Friday, Sept. 14.

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