David Byrne explores the artistic possibilities of PowerPoint in Berkeley lecture

Jane Ganahl
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He may ask himself, what is he doing here?

As the start of his lecture draws near, David Byrne seems to be having a case of nerves. Playing onstage for thousands of fans is one thing; making a university presentation is quite another. And he is having a hard time focusing on idle chat.

What's so great about PowerPoint, he is asked, that he would go on tour to demonstrate its virtues? The musician, artist, author and former Talking Head opens his mouth to speak about the famed presentation software, but no words emerge.

"Umm," he begins. Clearly stressed, his eyes dart every which way but in the direction of the questioner. "Um, um, um ... I have to disappear now."

And so he does, off to a quiet corner of the UC Berkeley Faculty Club, where a VIP reception for him is in full swing. His disappearance is noticeable; Byrne had been cutting quite a swath through the elite group, with his red and white striped shirt, shock of graying hair and two-tone saddle shoes. He is quite the exotic orchid in this crowd -- a mix of stodgy academicians and boho artists -- that he is there to enlighten and yes, entertain.

Byrne's lecture, "I (heart) PowerPoint," came about in recent years after he discovered not only the software but also how

The lecture, which took place Monday, is only the latest in the eight-year run of the Art, Technology and Culture Colloquium at UC Berkeley -- a wildly eclectic, cutting-edge series that brings together artists and scientists, students and faculty members to discuss issues at the intersection of digital media, emerging technologies and the arts.


Byrne is not the first musician to lecture here; jazz trombonist George Lewis spoke about computer music and how improvisational jazz relates to the concept of noise in outer space. But Byrne is certainly the most famous.

This is evidenced by long lines in front of the comfortably shabby Dwinelle Hall, where lectures take place. This is a free event, and organizers expect a turn-away crowd.

When Byrne takes the podium after an introduction by ATC Colloquium director Ken Goldberg, the rapturous applause dies to expectant silence.

"My name's David Byrne, and I'm going to do an introduction to PowerPoint," he says a bit hesitantly, to more applause. It's pretty much the last serious sentence Byrne will speak throughout the irony-heavy, hourlong demonstration, which is accompanied by simultaneous graphics on a huge screen behind him.

He delves into various components of the software, including bullet points, using PowerPoint graphics he has found online -- some of them inadvertently hilarious.

One religious Web site addresses, with bullet points:

Right Attitudes About the Poor:

-- Love them and help them -- Jesus did!

-- Leave some of our prosperity to them -- "leave them the corners of the field."

Byrne stares at the huge screen. "Of course, here that would mean the People's Park."

Tickled, the 52-year-old rock star laughs for the first time -- a soundless expression of air and mirth.
And there are other examples:

Why I Dumped You:

-- You lied about where you were and what you did.

-- You are a crack-smoking, child-abandoning mother of two.

-- You claim to have proven P = NP.

A little academic humor.

Slightly inside jokes for PowerPoint users are also made throughout the night. "If you're feeling timid and insecure about your presentation, Auto Content will create it for you."

Uproarious applause -- and a few blank stares from nonusers -- greet this insight.

Byrne is most interesting when he goes off on flights of fancy that illustrate why he is called the Renaissance man of rock. "PowerPoint is a symptom of a long train of thought that started picking up steam during the Enlightenment," he says. "The idea was that we could name everything and draw lines that connect them."

When he gets to charts, he is really rolling. A cylinder with small circles in it represents the world of pants. "Basically, this chart codifies the different kinds of pants," he deadpans. "Women's pants, children's pants .. ."

The audience is laughing too loudly to hear the rest.

Byrne stops his twitchy delivery long enough to smile and enjoy the approval.

The next lecture in the Technology and Culture Colloquium at UC Berkeley is April 18: "From Utopian Determinism to Network-Centric Paradigms," by Marko Peljhan, ProjektAtol-Pact Systems and UC Santa Barbara. For more information, go to: www.ieor.berkeley.edu/~goldberg/lecs.

E-mail Jane Ganahl at jganahl@sfchronicle.com.