Nightwork: A History of Hacks and Pranks at MIT

Institute Historian T. F. Peterson

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Before the term hacking became associated with computers, MIT undergraduates used it to describe any activity that took their minds off studying, suggested an unusual solution to a technical problem, or generally fostered nondestructive mischief. The MIT hacking culture has given us such treasures as police cars and cows on the Great Dome, a disappearing door to the President's office, and the commencement game of "Al Gore Buzzword Bingo." Hacks can be technical, physical, virtual, or verbal. Often the underlying motivation is to conquer the inaccessible and make possible the improbable. Hacks can express dissatisfaction with local culture or with administrative decisions, but mostly they are remarkably good-spirited. They are also by definition ephemeral. Fortunately, the MIT Museum has amassed a unique collection of hack-related pictures, reports, and remnants. Nightwork collects the best materials from this collection, to entertain innocent bystanders and inspire new generations of practitioners.

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