Multimedia Performances
by Annette Barbier and Marla Schweppe

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Music for Prosthetic Congas (Score Extract)

In the modern era, technology has made important contributions to, and it might be said even partnered with, live performance. One of the most memorable early innovators was Winsor McCay, better known as creator of the comic strip Little Nemo and the animated dinosaur Gertie than for stage performance. In addition to his better known activities, McCay was also one of the "chalk talk" performers who entertained while drawing, and in fact moved this genre forward enormously by introducing animated film projected onto his sketchpad on stage. Modern audiences are more familiar with a version of the Gertie cartoon which incorporates a bookend story of a gentleman's bet made over dinner that McCay could bring a dinosaur to life. However, the meat of the story, McCay's interaction with Gertie, was actually performed live on stage, with McCay timing his performance to the film, and giving Gertie directions, feeding her, and chastising her. [1]

Decades later, pioneer television producer Ernie Kovacs also interacted live with technology, incorporating it into his performance, which was in fact completely reliant upon various television techniques. Working without canned laughter or a studio audience, Kovacs created performances which could only be seen on TV, using, for example, a split screen to match the bottom half of his face with the top half of his guest's face in a hilarious interview. [2]

In the realm of high art, perhaps the best know early innovator is Merce Cunningham, whose 1965 work with John Cage, David Tudor, Stan Vanderbeek, and Billy Kluver (Variations V) used antennae and photocells to allow the movement of dancers to control tape recorders and live short wave radios. [3]

This issue of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac looks at a wide array of contemporary works incorporating technology into performance, inheritors of the legacy of these early experiments. Like their predecessors, these works, through incorporating technology, challenge the limits of performance, even redefine it.

Contributors examine work that ranges from the mapping of space to the examination of time, from the centrality of the human body to its replacement by the avatar or robotic/sculptural body. Some works unfold in real time, while others feature frozen moments; some happen on a network, others on the desktop; some embrace virtual space, others are firmly rooted in "real" space.

Amnon Wolman's desktop performance, for example, unfolds differently, in real time, each time it is played. It addresses not only our ever-varying sense of time, but also the intimate space of the desktop in creating a unique, individualized performance for every listener.

Jack Ox's networked performance proposes multiple points of entry as well as of reception. While creating a live, real time event, she also incorporates static images, visualizations of musical sequences.

Benoît Maubrey incorporates sound and video "accompaniment" into the body of the moving performer.

Christina Ray and Glowlab challenge our notion of performance by using cell phones to transmit the spectacle of everyday life observed.

Robert Gluck invites viewers to enter into the use of ritual objects, which respond to and amplify their actions, making them participants in a dialog with the work.

Pedro Rebelo creates musical "prostheses" which extend the acoustic into the electronic realm.

Bob Ostertag and Pierre Hébert examine the relationships between our bodies, our society's detritus, and the machines that interpret our actions, our computers.

Both papers and gallery statements in this issue represent some of the most innovative efforts by contemporary creator/performers in grappling with technology.

(Ed Note. Access the LEA Archives to read the LEA Multimedia Performances issue (Vol 13 No 11, November 2005).

Curator Biographies

Annette Barbier
Annette Barbier is an artist whose work began in sculpture and moved through video to new technologies including computer animation, virtual reality, and net art. Her work addresses home, domesticity, and the ways in which identity is bound with one's environment. It has moved from an emphasis on the personal to a consideration of the global, looking at ways in which the home has come to be defined more broadly as populations shift, and as our interdependence becomes increasingly clear.

Barbier graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with an MFA. She dropped out of college to spend a year in France, which was formative in making issues of home, culture and identity central to her work. Years later, a Fulbright lectureship in India with her 3-year-old daughter confirmed the importance of travel in questioning one's conceptions about the world, and resulted in a travel diary tape. More recent work is growing from a profoundly moving trip to Vietnam in 2003.

Barbier chairs the Interactive Arts and Media Department at Columbia College, Chicago, where she teaches interactive installation, animation, and new media.

Marla Schweppe
Marla Schweppe is a full professor in the Interactive Media Design and Imaging Department at the Rochester Institute of Technology. She serves as head of the Digital Studio and Director of Visualization. Early in her career she worked in theater, television and movies in New York City. She has been teaching computer graphics and animation for more than two decades. She developed the graduate and undergraduate programs in computer animation at RIT. She is currently developing curriculum in game art and design in coordination with a game programming degree. Her creative work includes the incorporation of her theatrical background into interactive digital performances and experiences, animatronics, explorations in physical interaction, and collaborative support for visualization and simulation of information and ideas.

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