2007 • Press

Golan Levin

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043 Hopper, Justin. “State of the Art: Local engineers and artists are using Pittsburgh’s high-tech expertise to make a statement.” *Pittsburgh City Paper*, 2/21/2007, p.18.


FRANCIS ALYS & PHOTOGRAPHY
INTERVIEW WITH BERTA SICHEL
MEDIA EDUCATION'S NEW CODE
RETURNING TO RICHARD BILLINGHAM'S "RAY'S A LAUGH" SERIES
Looking out

44th Society for Photographic Education National Conference
Miami
March 15–18, 2007

With even the most cursory glance at the downtown Miami skyline, one is immediately struck by the signs of new, vigorous growth. Dozens of buildings are in mid-climb, each structure’s ascent closely watched overhead by a crane. This new growth, carefully tended and rising out from what has come before, set amid the diversity of Miami, seems an ideal backdrop for the 2007 Society for Photographic Education (SPE) conference.

This year’s national conference, SPE’s forty-fourth, was dubbed “Look Out: Photography and the Worlds of Contemporary Art,” an apt moniker considering the photograph’s now established position in the contemporary scene. In fact, it is difficult to imagine an art world without photography. A straight-faced argument on the virtues of photography seems downright quaint at this stage of the game—a notion that was thoroughly illustrated by a private reception for conference-goers held at the Margulies Collection, a sprawling warehouse north of downtown Miami packed with an impressive collection of contemporary art, the majority being photographs.

The conference offered the standard mélange of speakers, image-makers, and panels, as well as the SPE Women’s Film Festival coordinated again by Lynn Estomin. At any given time several intriguing presentations vied for attention. As a result some presentations were not as populated as they could have been, decreasing the likelihood of lively panel discussions and making the exchange of ideas less fluid. Still, among trifles, the tyranny of choice is not so terrible when so many of the choices are good.

Among the highlights was Jeff Curto, professor of photography at the College of DuPage in Illinois, who enthusiastically preached the gospel of podcasting, wisely advising educators to reach their students however they can—in this case, through earbuds. Curto shared information and resources for the podcasting novice and most likely an increasing number of educators will have their lectures heard via iPod on the gym’s treadmill as regularly as in the classroom.

Martyn Jolly, head of photomedia at the Australian National University School of Art, used examples of work by fellow Australian artists Brooke Andrews, Anne Ferran, and Leah King-Smith, among others, to illustrate photographic specters in contemporary art and demonstrate the power of images re-contextualized to haunt the viewer or suggest an alternate history. Still, he cautioned that we do not redeem the past by using it simply as a mirror to see ourselves. George Blakely, professor of art at Florida State University, with feet planted firmly in the present, entertained a crowded room with visions and verbiage of modern love, juxtaposing a rich selection of projected images ranging from cheesy love trinkets to soft porn, looking askance at our culture’s dime-store expressions of this powerful emotion.

Foreshadowing next year’s conference theme, “Agents of Change: Art and Advocacy,” a panel from the Pittsburgh-based Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild shared their secrets for “Inspiring Youth Through Photography” in their hometown and their plans for replicating the program elsewhere. There was also a graduate presentation by Tara Malik and Aiyaa Martin detailing how the New Orleans Kid Camera Project is helping children to cope with disaster in their own backyards, and Neil Chowdhury spoke on teaching photography in Dubai and the impact that has had on helping young women to find their voice. All are examples of photography’s potential to go beyond the medium itself, the action of light translated to the action of humans.

By far one of the most informative presentations of the conference was Honored Educator Rod Slemmons’s speech on historic and contemporary Mexican and Latin American photography. Slemmons, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago, explored several threads of the medium’s growth in Mexico—from the well-known involvement of titans like Edward Weston and Tina Modotti, to current work by photographers including Jonathan Moller and Francisco Mata Rosas, and gave a well-deserved nod to Pedro Meyer and his Web site ZoneZero (www.zonezero.com). Given the Latin cultural influence found throughout the conference locale and the region’s general lack of coverage by many outlets, the decision to educate the conference attendees on the rich traditions of Latin American photographic work was well considered.

As in past years, with so many well-trained eyes in one building at one time, the chance to have one’s portfolio reviewed is not easily passed up. This year SPE provided several opportunities for conference attendees to have their work seen by a well-selected cross section of artists, professors, curators, and scholars from across the spectrum of the photographic world. Saturday saw dozens of student and professional SPE members lining up for scheduled meetings with reviewers; however, the decision to divide the less formal Sunday “Portfolio Sharing Walk-through” into separate “student” and “professional” rooms this year had a regrettable effect. While the buzz of activity in the “professional” room created a din difficult to talk over, one could hear a proverbial pin drop in the student room, despite the plush carpeting. The future of SPE lies with students, and a better solution might be found to enhance this opportunity for students to share their work.

Overall, the conference had much to offer the photographically inclined in the range of topics, speakers, and opportunities. Much like the Miami horizon, the medium around which this society is structured will continue to redefine itself, expanding in new directions, under the gaze of giants.

Tammie Malarich with contributions by Luke Strosnider
MEDIA EDUCATION’S NEW CODE

As a video instructor a few summers ago, I met several art professors who had enrolled in the workshop for a oneweek
seminar of digital instruction in hopes of steadying themselves against
the latest wave of technical demands. The concerns articulated by
this diverse group included how to lead content-rich, genuinely
creative, and human-centered courses in the era of Adobe software
dominance. Despite a university’s dedicated effort to keep pace on
the software upgrade treadmill, it seems that higher technology has not miraculously improved the content of student work or the
quality of learning.

The challenges of electronic arts education, however, are beginning
to be answered through creative actions and creative teaching.
My search for positive models of instruction led me to a particular
motion graphics course taught by Dan Boyarski, professor and head
of the School of Design at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) in
Pittsburgh. Boyarski and colleagues Ben Fry and Golan Levin are
all practicing artists and designers working across the spectrum
electronic time-based media practice. Each of their teaching
philosophies addresses questions of contemporary media education
innovative and practical ways—by reaching across the boundaries
of academic disciplines, writing code around the limitations of
prepackaged imaging packages, and preserving an emphasis on
human-centered work within electronic arts education.

An accomplished information designer himself, Boyarski won the
Design Management Institute’s Muriel Cooper Award in 1999
for outstanding achievement in advancing design technology
and communication in the digital environment. He speaks
internationally about his work and teaching methods, as well as
his concept of “visual voice.” In one of his talks, “Designing with
Time,” Boyarski uses student work from his own courses to convey
the complex issues related to time design in new media education.
Boyarski was a founding member of CMU’s Human Computer
Interaction Institute (HCII), where engineers, designers, computer
scientists, and social scientists collaborate in the study of the effects
of computer and interaction design on people and society.

An artist, engineer, and composer, Levin is also assistant professor of
electronic time-based art at CMU. He completed an undergraduate
degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)
and worked as a research scientist and interaction designer before
returning to MIT to study with John Maeda in the Aesthetics and
Computation Group. Writing his own code from scratch, Levin
creates interactive audiovisual software artworks that respond to
users’ gestures in real time. Levin’s works have been exhibited and
performed internationally, and, among other honors, have earned
him the Award of Distinction in the Prix Ars Electronica for the
interactive software “Audiovisual Environment Suite” (2000), and
“Scribble” (2000), the associated performance.

Fry is the current Nierenberg Chair of Design at CMU. Fry
completed his PhD in MIT’s Media Laboratory in 2004 where—
along with Casey Reas, another former student of Maeda’s—he
created Processing, an open-source program language and
environment and a tool for artists to use to program computers.
Fry’s visual investigations of complex dynamic information have
been shown in national and international venues. A long-term
project, “Genomic Cartography” (2002–7) combines science with
design disciplines to develop creative visualizations of information
relevant to the human genome.

JOANNA HEATWOLE: College digital arts programs are
sometimes criticized for “teaching to software” in the
same sense that United States schoolteachers are said to
feel pressured to “teach to the test.” At one East Coast
university, students can actually take a minor called
“Maya,” named after the three-dimensional animation
software program.

DAN BOYARSKI: You should design a class around learning outcomes
and goals, and then the appropriate software comes into play. I’m
nervous when I see a course entitled something like Introduction
to Visual Communication but one of the first sentences in the
course description says, “And you’re going to learn Photoshop
and Illustrator.” I think, “But aren’t they going to learn about
communication, about typography, about human beings?” I think
we get the message across pretty quickly to our students that we
want them to be proficient, but we’re going to teach them how to
think and how to ask questions and solve problems—not just how to
be good with Photoshop.

ABOVE
Still from Messa di Voci (2003) by Golan Levin and Zachary
Lieberman, with Jaap Blonk and Joan La Barbara
GOLAN LEVIN: Everything you learn in one of these software-oriented courses will soon be obsolete. On the other hand, you can make the argument that Photoshop has become a way of thinking that has permeated our culture and that this pattern is likely to persist in some aspects for decades. The answer is probably somewhere in-between. I'm just skeptical of the intellectual substance that is being communicated in a course entirely devoted to learning a program that was made by a specific company that effectively has a monopoly on commercial software. I find that totally repugnant.

John [Macda] has been particularly articulate about this question for fifteen years. One quote of his that I particularly like is, "If you're using someone else's software, you're living in someone else's dream." I think that is a very poetic way of saying that we can have and live our own dreams by making software do what we want rather than what someone else allows us to do.

I teach my students how to make their own code. For instance, I have them make a Paint program that does idiosyncratic things that Photoshop can't. This is a huge awakening for them; the blinders are taken off. They realize that Photoshop is not the only option that exists for image manipulation.

BEN FRY: Critical thinking skills won't be replaced by software anytime soon. The twenty-first century will require of students an even greater ability to synthesize and communicate their ideas clearly. Google and Wikipedia mean that fact-based information is a search away. It's not as though we've somehow evolved to deal with this in the last ten years, so the ability to absorb and synthesize this information becomes that much more important.

JOHN: How does one maintain and communicate a human-oriented perspective within this kind of machine-mediated work, particularly in teaching?

GL: It's doubly hard on the computer to make work that is moving, that arouses passions, or that has a connection to something beyond the computer itself. There are a variety of strategies—I can't tell you the formula of course because that would be a formula for good art. There certainly seems to be a risk with work done on the computer because one gets caught up in all of the tricks and techniques that are available.

BF: I think that this [humanity in electronic education] actually comes from embracing the machine as a tool and understanding that it's just one tool of many. We'd be a lot better off if people were both less scared of machines and also realized that the computer is a tool and medium like any other. I think the versatility of these machines makes people think that their soul is being taken away. If that is the attitude, it places the computer on a ridiculous pedestal.

DB: We really do focus on human-centered design here at CMU. It's all of what we do, and that is the bottom line message for freshman. We're not going to do this to be cool, and we're not going to do this to win awards—we're going to do this because people have problems that need to be solved.

JOHN: I found it interesting that in your talk "Designing with Time" you describe exercises in courses that are on the creative edge of digital and screen-based communication—but where your first step with the students was not a leap toward the high-tech, but rather a kind of step back to the very early traditions of spoken word, of performance.

DB: Right, and I've said to my students that I see kinetic type as being closer to the spoken word than I do to the written word. It is in the actual verbal performance that I have them draw the inspiration for the timing, for the words to move, and other properties. I use analogies of stage performance, film performance, and film editing to guide what we're doing. I definitely see that connection.

JOHN: The HCII at CMU is one example of a very successful collaboration between academic departments. How do you utilize interdisciplinary collaboration within your own courses?

DB: Faculty from literally all over campus founded the HCII, and I think collaboration is really a mark of this university. CMU is small enough that walls between programs are actually quite low. In some cases at the beginning there were some concerns and a few people said, "I don't want to teach writers" or "I don't want to teach engineers." Now we like to have those disciplines in our courses because the discussion becomes much more interesting.

GL: In the art school we have two tracks: media studios and concept studios. The media studios are skill-oriented courses in all of the basic media. Whereas [in the concept studios] students represent various disciplines and can use whatever medium they want; one might be working with sculpture while another could be working with video. We basically make the class "medium agnostic." They may have to create a map, a diagram, or a time series. If they use the computer, great, and if they don't, fine. The course is much more about the ideas. You know, it's interesting that with all of the great things that computers are capable of, the art doesn't actually get better. The lesson is that making something of quality still takes the same amount of time—real time, real passion, a good idea, and careful craft. In fact, making good art takes as long as it ever has.

JOANNA HEATWOLE: assistant professor of time-based media at Roberts Wesleyan College in Rochester, New York.

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT CMU SCHOOL OF DESIGN: WWW.DESIGN.CMU.EDU; CMU SCHOOL OF ART: HTTP://ARTSERVER.CFA.CMU.EDU; GOLAN LEVIN: WWW.FLOW.COM; BEN FRY: HTTP://ACG.MEDIA.MIT.EDU/PEOPLE/FRY/; PROCESSING 1.0 (beta): WWW.PROCESSING.ORG
Database Aesthetics

Art in the Age of Information Overflow

Victoria Vesna
categories) transparent for viewers, allowing them to take a critical look at how the project itself constructs its meta-narrative.

The characteristics of the database as a collection of information that can be structured according to various criteria and result in a meta-narrative in many ways differ from the concept of the traditional narrative (in the broadest sense) as it unfolds in a book, film, or even a single visual image. While narratives can be driven by many different strategies and factors—among them character development, cause-and-effect relationships between events, spatiotemporal movement—they generally establish a sequence of events or defined relationships (for example, in an event or “scene” depicted in a photograph). Many of the projects I discuss here (TextArc, the McCoy projects, Slippery Traces) impose database logic onto traditional forms of narrative. A project that visibly juxtaposes and fuses the “narrative engines” of the database and photography/moving images is Natalie Bookchin’s CD-ROM, The Databank Of The Everyday (1996). Bookchin’s project, a conceptually infinite database of life itself in all its mundane activities, uses elements of the computer database and an image catalog and identifies the loop as a narrative engine driving both of them. The loop is not only inherently connected to the roots of cinema and moving images, which first took the form of a flip-book-like loop of images, but is also a central element of programming and algorithms, which frequently use commands such as “if/then,” “while/wend,” “do/until,” “for/next,” and “repeat/while” to create their (visual) narrative. On a more metaphorical level, the redundancy of daily activities constitutes its own ever-repeating loop. In one segment of The Databank of the Everyday, the screen is divided into two frames, one of them showing a looping video of a woman shaving her leg, while the other one shows code and instructions corresponding to the movement of the woman’s arm. The segment thus exposes the algorithms that drive a visual representation, moving the usually hidden background of code to the visible foreground.

A very different and original approach to moving the background to the foreground unfolds in The Secret Life of Numbers by Golan Levin, with Martin Wattenberg, Jonathan Feinberg, Shelly Wynecoop, David Elashoff, and David Becker. The project does not take an existing “story” as its source but studies the relative popularity of every integer between zero and one million. By means of custom software, data from public search engines, and statistical techniques, the artists determined the popularity of numbers and expose their “secret life”—patterns of associations that reflect cultural interests. The mathematical tool and system that provides the basis for
programming is turned into the object of analysis and reveals its own "values." As the artists put it in their statement:

Our present relationship with numbers reveals both a highly developed tool and a highly developed user, working together to measure, create, and predict both ourselves and the world around us. But like every symbiotic couple, the tool we would like to believe is separate from us (and thus objective) is actually an intricate reflection of our thoughts, interests, and capabilities. One intriguing result of this symbiosis is that the numeric system we use to describe patterns is actually used in a patterned fashion to describe.13

The interactive visualization consists of two interfaces: a histogram where the popularity of numbers is indicated by the length of lines protruding from them, and a graph consisting of cells that make up a grid arranged in rows of one hundred where the more popular integers have brighter cells. A menu indicates the value of popularity for any chosen number and reveals its "associations" (such as historical dates). As to be expected, the number ten and its multiples show a higher popularity because they are driven by the base-ten numbering system. It also does not come as a surprise that, in terms of calendar years, people generally seem to be more interested in the present than in the past. Other numbers that stand out are those corresponding

Figure 5.6. Screen shot from The Secret Life of Numbers by Golan Levin, Martin Wattenberg, Jonathan Feinberg, Shelly Wynecoop, David Elashoff, and David Becker.
to important historical dates, area codes, or relating to pop-cultural phenomena such as the television show 90210.

The fact that the data were gathered largely through Web-based statistics also becomes a reflection of people's interest within this particular environment. It is notable that the relative "importance" of the model numbers of products—ranging from cars and cameras to computer processors—by far outweighs that of historical events. Applying an additional filtering mechanism, *The Secret Life of Numbers* could probably be configured into a history of commercial products and their success. The project succeeds in delivering what the artists refer to as a "numeric snapshot of the collective consciousness," a revealing portrait of our interests as they manifest themselves in the descriptive systems we use.

Given the fact that database structure in the broadest sense lies at the root of digital media, it is only natural that database aesthetics play a major role in digital art and culture. The 1990s were a decade of major digitization, when libraries, archives, and museum collections were translated into digital format, allowing for new forms of filtering and relational connections. However, it seems that "database aesthetics" in the broadest sense has become emblematic of our time, extending beyond the digital realm and transcending the traditional archives of the library and museum. The notion of relational databases as an organizational model seems increasingly to infiltrate culture. *Documenta XI*, for example, featured an enormous amount of nondigital archival projects—numerous archives of photographs documenting a journey, place, condition, memories (cultural and personal); an archive of "Insomnia Drawings" by Louise Bourgeois; Feyzjou's boutiques, a Wunderkammer of personal history and identity; several room-size installations that were transplants of artists' studios, archives of notes, drawings, scrapbooks; On Kawara's *One Million Years*, a database; Sanja Ivekovic's archive *Searching for My Mother*, a lexical/semantic inventory of the dictionaries of the Brothers Grimm. Largely brought about by digital technologies, database aesthetics itself has become an important cultural narrative of our time, constituting a shift toward a relational, networked approach to gathering and creating knowledge about cultural specifics.

**Notes**

Richard Colson

The Fundamentals of Digital Art
“Many interactive artworks are designed exclusively for one person at a time, which presents a challenge when showing interactive works in conventional gallery settings. However, works also exist where multiple users actually enhance the works, for the audience can not only interact with artworks, but with each other too.”

Beryl Graham
Maurizio Vanni
Gerfried Stocker

Mondi paralleli
Ars Electronica - Hybrid Moments

Carlo Cambi Editore
Tmema
(Golan Levin and Zachary Lieberman)

Ars Electronica
Futurelab

The Hidden Worlds of Noise and Voice

2002
The Hidden Worlds of Noise and Voice è un'installazione audiovisiva interattiva o, in alternativa, un sistema di visualizzazione-vocalizzazione di “accrescimento della realtà”. Il suo tema centrale è la relazione magica tra la parola e il mezzo etereo che la trasmette. Chi partecipa a Hidden Worlds è in grado di “vedere” le voci degli altri, rese visibili sottoforma di figurazioni grafiche animate che sembrano emergere dalle labbra dei partecipanti mentre parlano. Nell'installazione i visitatori indossano visori speciali che registrano e sovrappongono la grafica 3D nel mondo reale. Quando uno degli utenti parla o canta, figure astratte colorate sembrano emergere dalle sue labbra. I grafici che rappresentano queste enunciazioni assumono una grande varietà di forme e movenze che sono strettamente legate alle qualità uniche del volume, del tono e del timbro del parlante. Hidden Worlds permette a un massimo di sei visitatori di partecipare all'allucinazione consensuale, consentendo un'ampia gamma di affascinanti giochi audiovisivi e di conversazione. Per gli utenti privi di visori una proiezione al centro dell'installazione rende visibili le "ombre" delle figure parlate virtuali. Hidden Worlds è stato sviluppato nell'estate del 2002 ed è attualmente installato in una esposizione biennale all'Ars Electronica Museum of the Future a Linz, in Austria.
Biografie di G. Levin e Z. Lieberman


Biographies of G. Levin and Z. Lieberman

Golan Levin is born in 1972 in New York but lives and works in Pittsburgh. He is interested in creating artifacts and experiences which explore supple new modes of nonverbal expression. He graduated in September 2000 from the MIT Media Laboratory, where he studied with John Maeda in the Aesthetics and Computation Group. Prior to MIT he worked at Interval Research Corporation on the design of tools and toys for multimedia play and production. Levin is Assistant Professor of Electronic Time-Based Art at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh.

Zachary Lieberman is an artist, engineer, and educator whose work is focused on exploring the creative and human uses of technology. He produces installations, on-line works and concerts concerned with the themes of kinetic and gestural performance, interactive imaging and sound synthesis. Lieberman lives and works in New York City, where he teaches courses in audiovisual synthesis and creative image processing at Parsons School of Design.
Golan Levin  +  MIT Media Laboratory
An Audiovisual Environment Suite
1998-2000
L'Audiovisual Environment Suite (AVES) è un gruppo di cinque sistemi interattivi che permettono di creare e rappresentare animazioni astratte e suoni sintetici in tempo reale. Ogni ambiente è un tentativo sperimentale di progettare un'interfaccia che sia flessibile e facile da imparare, che possa tuttavia produrre performance interessanti, infinitamente variabili e personalmente espressive sia in campo visivo che in campo uditorio. Idealmente questi sistemi permettono agli interagenti di essere coinvolti in uno stato fluido di pura esperienza.

I sistemi AVES sono costruiti attorno alla metafora di una "sostanza" audiovisiva inesauribile e dinamica, che è liberamente depositata e controllata dalla gestualità degli utenti. Ogni strumento situa questa sostanza in un contesto la cui struttura priva di forma si rifà al linguaggio visivo dell'animazione e della pittura astratte. L'uso di tecniche di sintesi di basso livello permette ai suoni e alle immagini di essere strettamente collegati, adeguatamente malleabili e profondamente plastici. I sistemi AVES si situano all'incrocio tra arte, design e ingegneria dei mezzi e degli strumenti. Come opere d'arte proseguono una tradizione stabilita nel ventesimo secolo, secondo cui le opere d'arte sono esse stesse sistemi generativi per altri media. Come insieme di strumenti, AVES rappresenta la visione di un uso creativo del computer, in cui effimeri media dinamici fioriscono esclusivamente dalla stretta collaborazione tra l'utente del sistema e il designer.
The Audiovisual Environment Suite (AVES) is a set of five interactive systems which allow people to create and perform abstract animation and synthetic sound in real time. Each environment is an experimental attempt to design an interface which is supple and easy to learn, yet can also yield interesting, infinitely variable and personally expressive performances in both the visual and aural domains. Ideally, these systems permit their interactants to engage in a flow state of pure experience. The AVES systems are built around the metaphor of an inexhaustible and dynamic audiovisual "substance", which is freely deposited and controlled by the user's gestures. Each instrument situates this substance in a context whose free-form structure inherits from the visual language of abstract painting and animation. The use of low-level synthesis techniques permits the sound and image to be tightly linked, commensurately malleable, and deeply plastic. The AVES systems inhabit a domain at the juncture of art, design, and the engineering of tools and instruments. As artworks, they extend an established Twentieth century tradition in which artworks are themselves generative systems for other media. As a set of tools, the AVES work represents a vision for creative endeavor on the computer, in which uniquely ephemeral dynamic media blossom from a close collaboration between a system's user and designer.
An Audiovisual Environment Suite. Author: Golan Levin + MIT Media Laboratory.
VEDERE L’INVISIBILE

Golan Levin trasforma i gesti in suono e la voce in seducenti immagini astratte. Grazie al computer, con cui crea installazioni e performance che a Chiara Somajni paiono specchi magici di noi stessi. Foto di Cesare Cicardini

PER IL MOMENTO non ha un nome, viene chiamato semplicemente "prototipo di robot". È un bulbo oculare meccanico che pare uscito da un fumetto. Per Zenon (un bambino di sette mesi), che ci è cresciuto insieme, è una presenza normale. Un po’ meno per noi, che su Flickr.com possiamo osservare entrambe le neonate creature di Golan Levin: il primo figlio, che gli ha scombussolato la vita, e il primo automa, con il quale la sua ricerca ha per l’ennesima volta imboccato una strada nuova.

«Sono un artista americano, ho 35 anni, lavoro per lo più con i computer, attualmente insegno alla Carnegie-Mellon di Pittsburgh, dove vivo. Mi occupo di comunicazione astratta». A chiedergli di dare una definizione di sé è questa la risposta che si riceve, sintetica, pragmatica e tremendamente riduttiva. Per accorgersene basta ripercorrerne anche solo a grandi passi la storia creativa: Golan Levin è infatti una delle figure più ricche, versatili, originali nel panorama della cosiddetta new media art, l’arte prodotta con le tecnologie digitali.

Alcuni dei suoi progetti sono stati studiati per Internet, dove sono tutt’oggi accessibili: come The Secret Lives of Numbers, sorta di ritratto della cultura rappresentata in rete attraverso i numeri, o Dumpster, visualizzazione dinamica della vita sentimentale degli adolescenti americani. Più numerose e impegnative le opere performative: dal concerto per telefoni cellulari Diatones, A Telesymphony all’opera Messa di Voce (in cui le figure e le voci dei due performer Jaap Blonk e Joan La Barbara generano in tempo reale uno spettacolo visivo), da Ursonography (rivisitazione audiovisiva della Ursonate, capolavoro di Kurt Schwitter) fino a opere come Scribble, The Manual Input Sessions, Scrapple. Queste ultime sono
sistemi che possono essere fruiti individualmente ma che sono sostanzialmente pensati per spettacoli audiovisivi, dove i performer, interagendo con un mouse, con degli oggetti, o semplicemente giocando con le mani, producono musica e immagini in tempo reale. Levin chiama queste performance di figure astratte e suoni organizzati generati dal vivo life cinema. Opere nelle quali, a differenza della maggiore parte di quelle create da altri autori con strumenti analoghi, l’esperienza sia del performer sia dello spettatore è straordinariamente gratificante.

Le installazioni interattive hanno infatti un vizio: soffrono nel 99 per cento dei casi del cosiddetto “effetto Tamagotchi”: visto-giocato-capito-dimenticato. Quelle di Levin intrappolano lo spettatore-attore in un gioco ben diverso: lo calano in quello stato mentale che lo psicologo cognitivo Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (un maestro, per Levin) chiama “flusso creativo”, momenti di concentrazione assoluta e totale assorbimento in ciò che si sta facendo. «È una condizione magica, in cui non si è né frustrati né annoiati, ma in dialogo con se stessi. Un po’ come nel rapporto tra il bambino e la madre», spiega Levin. Così accade appunto nell’interagire con le sue opere: si innescà un processo virtuoso, in cui l’installazione risponde alla nostra azione, in maniera ricca, evolutiva.

Non meno sofisticato e attento alla dimensione psicologica è il life cinema di Levin, non solo per il performer, ma anche per chi assiste in platea, da spettatore. Il materiale di cui si serve è fatto di niente, almeno all’apparenza (la tecnologia non è mai ostentata): colori, triangoli, bolle, luce, suoni... Eppure, anche con così poco – come in Italia ha potuto verificare chi abbia assistito al suo spettacolo a “RomaEuropa” lo scorso anno, o alla dimostrazione alla Mediateca di Milano, per la serie “Meet the media guru” – riesce a conquistare la nostra attenzione e le nostre emozioni. E a farci ridere! «Generando aspettative, per poi violarle o confermarle, a sorpresa», spiega, osservando quanto poco sia esplorata la via dell’ironia nella new media art. E in polemica con quelle “laptop performance”, dove non si capisce cosa accada, quale sia la relazione tra ciò che percepiamo con i
Non solo computer: Levin si avvale anche di scanner e lavagne luminose.

Oggi lavora a un prototipo di occhio-robot al quale vuole insegnare a reagire al contatto visivo con una persona.

sensi e ciò che il musicista fa suo palcoscenico sul suo computer. Levin al contrario è sempre attento a rendere comprensibili le dinamiche dei suoi spettacoli audiovisivi. Il rapporto tra gesto e suono/immagine è immediatamente riconoscibile: vediamo ad esempio una mano che definisce una forma che corrisponde a un suono; la forma si muove e parallelamente il suono fa altrettanto. E non disdegna tecnologie che alcuni potrebbero considerare obsolete, come le lavagne luminose o lo scanner, sebbene reinventate e attualizzate.

In *The Hidden Worlds of Noise and Voice* (commissionata dall’Ars Electronica Festival di Linz, e oggi parte della collezione dell’Ars Electronica Center), ci si siede a un tavolo e, indossato un paio di occhiali speciali e un microfono, si è invitati a chiacchierare; senonché i suoni che noi emettiamo prendono forma tridimensionale, vengono visualizzati come bolle colorate che si muovono nello spazio proprio nella direzione in cui li abbia-
mo pronunciati. Nonostante il virtuosismo, non è forse l’opera più riuscita di Levin, ma è una di quelle in cui emerge chiaramente la sua vocazione primaria: rendere visibile ciò che visibile non è, la voce e i gesti innanzitutto («in essi è codificata la nostra identità»), rimanendo nell’alveo dell’astrazione: dunque dell’immaginazione, del sensibile, della comunicazione non verbale.

L’astrazione è per Levin un «vedere l’immagine nel suo insieme, ignorando i dettagli. Un po’ come nei cartoni animati». Figlio di un artigiano incisore e di un’artista, lui l’immagine d’insieme parrebbe non averla persa mai di vista. A cinque anni già sapeva che da grande avrebbe voluto combinare arte e tecnologia e studiare al Massachusetts Institute of Technology di Boston, cosa che ha fatto. Oggi affianca la sua attività di artista a quella di docente: «Vorrei aiutare i miei studenti ad appropriarsi del computer, a trasformarlo in un medium personale, in uno strumento di espressione individuale: è facile assemblare in un collage frammenti di buona musica per ricavarne un nuovo brano, e si ottengono anche ottimi risultati. Altra cosa è produrre musica nuova, una creatura che abbia vita propria, da scoprire mentre la si genera».

La “musica nuova”, per Golan Levin, oggi, sono i robot. Alla Carnegie-Mellon può avvalersi di competenze all’avanguardia. Ma ancora una volta il fulcro della sua ricerca rimane la visualizzazione dell’invisibile e il computer una sorta di specchio magico, in cui troviamo riflesse, amplificate, parti di noi stessi. Protagonista ora è l’occhio stesso, come capacità di visione, di riconoscimento, di comunicazione. Che cosa significa “contatto visivo”? Come automatizzarlo? Nel suo prossimo lavoro proverà a dare una risposta a queste domande. Che ne sottendono molte altre: attraverso il rapporto uomo-macchina, che nelle sue opere si sciolge fino a diventare “naturale” proiezione di sé, Levin non fa che indagare e rappresentare lo spazio umanissimo della relazione con se stessi e con il prossimo. Senza politica, senza ideologia, ma per sintetiche e immaginifiche rappresentazioni.
Trailblazing in New Media

John Maeda. E. Rudge and Nancy Allen Professor of Media Arts and Sciences at The Media Laboratory, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), is part artist, part computer scientist and part educator. He is one of the world's leading figures in digital art and graphics. He experiments with the way software can generate print and interactive screen-based work, and the crossovers between the book and the computer. He views the computer not as an inferior substitute for brush and paint but as an expressive medium in its own right. Among his best-known abstract works are The Reactive Square, a simple black square on a computer screen that changes shape if you shout at it, and Time Paint, in which paint flies across the screen. In 2004 he launched a research initiative called "Simplicity," designed to make computers easier to use and less intrusive.

Examples of projects by John Maeda that explore the graphic possibilities for creative expression through computer programming.
www.maedastudio.com

Yugo Nakamura is based in Tokyo. Trained as an engineer, he developed an interest in people and their surroundings. Inspired by John Maeda, he has been fascinated by the web as an environment for several years now. His use of Flash to create fluid, naturalistic images and sequences has caused a sensation in the design world. His website plunges you straight into an enchanting, playful, and finely crafted world of interactive forms. You can distort or repeat forms and generate new images by simple gestures. Nakamura demonstrates how small logical procedures can be used to develop beautiful, elegant, and often humorous results. He says: "There's usability but there's also joy; there's that simple fun of being able to touch and feel, that can draw you deeper into a web experience."


Golan Levin studied with John Maeda in the Aesthetics and Computation Group at the MIT Media Laboratory. Between his first and second degree he worked for four years as an interaction designer and research scientist at Interval Research Corporation, and is now Assistant Professor of Electronic Time-Based Art at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Artist, composer, and engineer, he has attracted a worldwide reputation in the design community for his simultaneous sound and image performances, produced using cybernetic systems. In 2001, he created Dialtones, a work made up of the choreographed ringing of the audience's mobile phones. In 2004, he developed the Manual Input Sessions. Performed live on stage, this was a series of audio-visual acts that probed the expressive possibilities of hand gestures in creating sound.

The Manual Input Sessions probe the expressive possibilities of hand gestures and finger movements. Performances involve a combination of custom interactive software, analog overhead projectors, and digital computer video projectors. The analog and digital projectors are aligned so that their projections overlap, resulting in an unusual quality of hybridized, dynamic light. Golan Levin and Zachary Lieberman with Joan La Barbara and Jaap Blonk.
on the website, rather than selecting only a few works that would fit my pre-conceived ideas. I have also looked at all the accompanying statements—none of which as far I can see explicitly evokes the sciences of complexity. My experiment worked even better than I expected since almost all pieces in the online component of the show follow the aesthetics of complexity, invoking complex systems in the natural world more often and more literally than I had anticipated.

Golan Levin’s Yellowtail software amplifies the gestures of the user, producing ever-changing, organic-looking lines of constantly varying thickness and transparency (see fig. 16.1). The complexity of the lines and their dynamic behavior make the animation look like a real-time snapshot of some biologically possible universe. The work perfectly illustrates how the same element (i.e., a line) that in modernist abstraction represented the abstract structure of the world now evokes instead the world’s richness and complexity. (Similar effects are at work in the piece by Manny Tan.) In other words, if modernist abstraction assumes that behind the sensorial richness of the world there are simple abstract structures that generate this richness, such a separation of levels is absent from software abstractions. Instead, we see a dynamic interaction of elements that periodically leads to certain orderly configurations.

Insertsilence by James Paterson and Amit Pitaru starts with the few tiny lines moving inside a large circle; a click by the user immediately increases the
lack of tangibility and hence economic currency, and has played an awkward and marginalised role within museums and galleries. For some, this is undoubtedly an attraction, Internet artists need no approval or validation to offer their art within a public space. They need not have conventional educational qualifications as artists either, and indeed, many major figures like Golan Levin, who’s *Secret Life of Numbers*, 2002 visualises a history of numeric data drawn from a popular search engine, have come quite naturally from a computer science background. Internet art, therefore questions ‘real’ presence and standard institutional borders by celebrating its inherent, characteristic agency.

Internet art has its historical roots in conceptual art and in particular, Fluxus, which attempts to dissolve hierarchies of the art-market, and conceive of art as an open-ended system that embraces distributed authorship. Similarly, Internet art also originates from Jack Burnham’s notion of the ‘system aesthetic’, which describes art as an ‘open’ work in which the role of the artist is that of an agent, who considers ‘goals, boundaries, structure, input, output, and related activity inside and outside the system’. Subsequently, a systems approach recognises the interactive and transactional nature of a work placing emphasis on constant and critical dialogue between art, participant and context (in this case, the Internet, the ‘user’ and the WWW). In addition, Burnham’s system aesthetic reduces the importance of visible syntax, ‘in a systems context, invisibility, or invisible parts share equal importance with things seen’, an idea which is retained in Internet art’s poetic probing of its global context. The idea that the open work fosters agency was also discussed by Umberto Eco in *The Open Work*, who cites James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, as an example because it

considerable contributions within the conservation of software based art, are two prominent examples. Major galleries and museums including the Whitney Art Port (www.artport.whitney.org), and DIA Center (www.diacenter.org/webproj) have created web galleries, in which they largely commission and host Internet art exclusively. Where as these galleries are considered portals or additions to the major sites, Tate, whose Internet gallery is small but of a high quality, now considers the site www.tate.org.uk/netart as an additional Tate, which may help to centralise and validate Internet art practice. Furthermore, the Guggenheim’s ‘virtual projects’ gallery (whose current site is minimal) is working with Asymptote Architects to create a ‘virtual museum’ - the ‘Guggenheim Museum in cyberspace’ project, which, if realized, will attempt to house real time, interactive works within the gallery as well as online exclusive. All accessed 01/04/2007.

13 Ibid, 17
14 Ibid, 22
Signals from visitors' phones trigger LED lights to dance in the "Cell Phone Disco" display at Baltimore's Contemporary Museum.

Art

Me, My Cell and I: Can You Hear Me Now?

By Jessica Dawson
Special to The Washington Post

A BALTIMORE bunch of young men and women in the Contemporary Museum are wielding evolution's greatest gift — opposable thumps — with an agility Darwin would admire. Digits fly as each person responds to the anonymous text messages being sent to their Nokias, Sony Ericsons or LGs.

The barrage of questions are part of a one-night-only performance of student-made, cellphone-based artwork. Called "Mood," it is the creation of a trio of Maryland Institute College of Art students.

Willing museum visitors are handed business cards upon entering the gallery telling them to send the word "mood" as a text message to a particular phone number in 240 area code. A few seconds later, a text message pops up on their mobiles. It comes in the form of a question.

"3/15/07 6:00 pm ... Text: How at home are you right now? 1 — very little, 5 very much."

This visitor decides the situation merits a 3.

Another text follows. "Are you very careful to whom you express your love?" There are five others that amount to a telephonic version of eHarmony. As numeric replies accumulate in the artwork's computer, a real-time image screens the word "MOOD," which changes color along with audience dispositions. Tonight, the mood of these 70-odd visitors, many MICA students and their supporters, is predominantly blue.

Turns out this very current media art is based on that old hippie staple, the mood ring. Like that just-for-kicks bauble, "Mood" doesn't make claims to empirical analysis. In fact, Michael Ries, a 33-year-old MICA senior who is one of the work's au

See ART, C4, Col. 3

A smorgasbord of art at six local venues. Galleries, C2
Where Cellphone Settings Include Mood Ring

ART, From C1

ithers, explains that “everything comes together and washes out.” By the law of averages, one person’s good mood cancels another’s black. The data collected in “Mood” collapses into a familiar bell curve. Ries and his two collaborators, Yevlynus An and Joel Bobock, hope to create an ever-expanding database for future cellphone works.

Though cellphones are tonight’s subject, they are just one example of interactive media — others depend on the Internet and other electronic links — that make up the ferment that is today’s technology art scene.

It is in its infancy. At least partly, the art is about connecting with strangers. For many contemporary art theorists, art is no longer an object or even an idea, but a relationship. Interfacing via mobile devices is a way to spark those relationships in the gallery. And the ubiquity of the cellphone gives the medium a certain populist edge.

If nothing else, we have our phones in common.

“Mood” was performed at the museum Thursday night as part of the Contemporary Museum’s larger “Cell Phone: Art and the Mobile Phone” exhibition, which runs through April 22. The show includes artists and collectives manipulating mobile phone technology in a variety of ways: Golab Levin conducted a cellphone symphony while Amsterdam-based collective Informationlab captures visitor phone signals that trigger dancing LEDs.

The aim of interactivity is to eliminate the single artist’s voice and replace it with that of the collective. The tenor is populist. And it owes something to the audience-dependent performance of the 1970s and identity politics of the 1980s. If artistic discourse of the ’70s and ’80s expanded to include people of color, women and gays, 21st-century discourse goes a step forward to include just about everybody, including every Joe and Mary.

Problem is, not every Joe and Mary, or even a cadre of Joes and Marias, can offer the kind of insight that one really talented artist might. Collectivity can so dilute its message that it ceases to make a point.

That kind of plurality doesn’t bother James Rouveille, the MICA Interactive Media Department co-chair who shepherded the show here tonight. At 38, Rouveille is old enough to remember life without cellphones and the Internet. He’s more than happy to witness the end of The Artist.

“It’s time for these things to be fractured,” Rouveille insists.

When Rouveille describes a typical undergraduate class at MICA, the proceedings sound decidedly splintered. As Rouveille lectures, a live “tag cloud” — basically a computer screen that scrolls text sent via cellphone — is projected behind him. Students logging onto particular words or phrases during the lecture will text them to the screen. The more students text a word, the larger it appears on the screen. Students also blast texts to each other’s phones during class.

Though it sounds like a recipe for clowning, Rouveille thinks differently.

“Every form — tagging, SMS, speaking — has a different syntax,” Rouveille explains. “There is value in those different syntactic structures.” In typical speech, with normal subject-verb agreements and basic grammatical rules, Rouveille maintains, “we get rid of things.” Those things might include snippets of ideas that, when expressed, make for richer interaction. In other words, socialization has its costs.

Rouveille thinks that alternative forms of communication can illuminate aspects of human experience normally left underground. If Rouveille is correct, we may be in the midst of a revolution in artistic expression.

In art and in the classroom, personal technology like the cellphone offers an opportunity for the sharing of experiences and the building of what he calls “collective intelligence.” For Rouveille and his students, technology brings people together.

The word “mood” changes color to match audience members’ disposition based on their text messages.

Cell Phone: Art and the Mobile Phone, through April 22. Contemporary Museum, 100 W. Centre St., Baltimore. 410-783-5720. www.contemporary.org. Open Wed-Sat. Noon to 5, and Thursdays until 7. $5 suggested donation. $3 students. The exhibition has one more public event: “Tactical Sound Garden Workshop” with Mark Shepard, April 14, 1-2 p.m. He will lead the group in making a sound piece on the streets of Baltimore. All are welcome to participate and encouraged to bring an Internet-enabled device. To see the Brooklyn-based artist’s work, visit www.tacticalsoundgarden.net

Check Out
What’s New on the Online Front
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PLACIDO DOMINGO
PHOTOGRAPHED BY BRYAN ADAMS

The sound of silence – The rediscovery of silence
Nifty but noisy – Restaurants in New York
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra – The best in the best way
Synesthesia – Do you hear colors?
Lanzarote – César Manrique’s world
PHONETIC SYMBOLISM

Messa di Voce shows previously unimagined sound possibilities

Computer science that can deeply move us? Yes – for example, cultural computer science. It makes Messa di Voce more than a concert performance. The audiovisual interactive installation by Golan Levin and Zachary Lieberman combines software art with the human voice in a unique way. The sung and spoken sounds of voice acrobats Jaap Blonk and Joan La Barbara are transformed into complex, subtly different and highly expressive graphics in real time. The images generated by language are directly projected onto a screen by means of visualization software. And in a way that they seem to come directly from the singer’s head. For us spectators it is fascinating and uncomfortable at the same time: New dimensions that seem to have always been there suddenly become visible, tangible. Here, the early 20th century utopias of synesthesia and synchrony, as they were also dreamt of in the Bauhaus movement, are being realized in the early 21st century. Definitely worth a visit.

The Messa di Voce installation can be viewed until March 2007 at the Ball State Museum in Muncie, Indiana, USA. There will also be a year-long installation in Roanoke, Virginia, USA at the Art Museum of Western Virginia, starting in February 2007. Additionally, there are quasi-permanent installations of the project at the Ars Electronica Museum in Linz, Austria (until September 2007) and at the Zentrum fuer Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany (permanent, but may travel to other locations).

http://www.tmema.org/messa/messa.html
In addition to being staged as a performance, Messa di Voce has also been exhibited as an interactive installation. In this installation, several of the different graphical modules from the concert are made available to the public.
joan la barbara
The performers take their most direct control of the canvas, painting bold gestures by singing. They erase their marks by making the sound, “Ssh!” From the hushed, simple tones of the previous section, the performers develop a vocabulary of quickly-changing glissandos, melodic fragments, and abstract speech-songs.
ART

Save Your Minutes

CELL PHONE TRIES TO LOCATE THE CRIME SCENE OUTFITTER OF TECHNOLOGY'S INVASION OF OUR DAILY LIVES

BY JASON HUGHES

CELL PHONE: ART AND THE MOBILE PHONE

At the Contemporary Museum through April 22

FEATURING AN INTERNATIONAL ROSTER OF BOTH emerging and established artists, Cell Phone: Art and the Mobile Phone presents a range of recent works that explore how wireless technology is being utilized as an emerging art form. All of the exhibited works are intended to use specific features and technologies such as camera phones, video phones, global positioning systems, Bluetooth technology, ring-tone sounds, and messaging. By using this technology, several of the works naturally call for a high level of audience participation. In a few cases, this interaction is experienced in real time, while more than half of these interactive works exist, instead, as documentation from previous installations and performances. Although one artist uses mobile devices sculpturally, the remainder of the noninteractive works simply use the mobile phones' video features to present short video art clips.

As one of three major corporate sponsors for this exhibition, Noka has sought to help artists find new ways in which to distribute their work and pioneer artistic creation. A primary example of this would be the Connect to Art initiative, where a collection of emerging and established artists have been invited to produce short films intended to be displayed on video phones. Many of the films on view at the Contemporary are intriguing pieces in and of themselves, most notably the works of Yang Fudong, Ali Welioglu, and Brian Alfred.

For example, Pae White's "One Knife, One Owl" trilogy features two young Asian men casually dressed in collared shirts and ties who eventually also wear removable long gray beards reminiscent of old kung fu masters. As the trilogy unfolds, the two go from concentrating in city streets facing off with one another in a style that is closer to a kung fu performance than martial arts sparring. The costumes and engagement level suggest the layers of make-believe in everyday life and how people perceive themselves as participants within this daily practice. Welioglu's "Water ink" simply films drops of black ink hitting the camera's lens, allowing the glittering ink to disperse in reimagining organic patterns that look like living cellular formations—perhaps a little tongue-in-cheek but visually captivating nonetheless. Alfred's "Radar" animation graphically illustrates the unseen "information" radiating out from the cellular towers that surround us, playfully and elegantly featuring technology's physical presence in our daily lives.

The downside to these—and all the other well-made Connect to Art shorts—is that, first, in almost every case the scale and medium appears to be an afterthought for the artists. Secondly, bookending each and every clip is a plug for the Nokia handset phone (the device you watch the video on). As a result, the video art clips become more akin to internet advertising campaigns, further integrating art, life, and technology.

Beatrice Valentine Amherst's sculptural work "VIDEOSILAatroopy nooo" is totally composed of imagery with a video phone. This piece—a braided cluster of video phones hanging from the ceiling in a chandelier of short, pistol-like clips featuring closeups of a woman's face and body—purposely references that phone cells have become extensions of our bodies. While the work itself looks rather obvious, it does ask you to consider the extent to which digital technology has transformed how we produce images and the ways in which wireless communication has transformed our selves.

Bookending the videos is a plug for the Nokia Nseries phone, making the clips Internet advertising campaigns.

RAISING THE BAR: BALTIMORE ARTIST COLLECTIVE URBANTELLS "CELL:BLOCK."

CITY PAPER
Built with Processing
の対応がよくデザインされた、視覚的にも美しい作品を制作しています。Levin氏の作品もまた、ヨーロッパ、アメリカ、アジアで幅広く展示されています。

The Dumpster
* http://artport.whitney.org/commissions/thedumpster/

The Dumpsterはアメリカのティーンエイジャーの失恋の可視化を行ったウェブベースの作品です。2006年にGolan Levin, Kamal Nigam, Jonathan Feinbergの3名で制作されました。実常に何百ものオンラインにあるブログを検索して、鑑賞者は何万もの恋愛記録で「捨てられた」という記事を見ることができます。このプロジェクトのために作られた可視化のツールは思いがけない失恋の相関性や、独特の差異、基礎パターンを明らかにしたそうです。世界中の規模の恋愛の痛みを可視化した、ユニークな作品です。
In almost every way, the house is an ordinary, two-story Pittsburgh dwelling. Perched on a darkened side-street that sees little traffic, it could be any working-class neighborhood’s home to 2.5 kids. Could be, that is, if it weren’t for its eyes. Roving eyes fill the second-floor windows, watching the street like those of a guard dog. But as they dart back and forth, over a period of minutes, the eyes drift out of synch: The left eye begins acting to its right just as its brother reaches the left side of its path.

Meanwhile, deep in the bowels of Carnegie Mellon University’s Doherty Hall, the eyes themselves are being watched. Osman Khan’s computer is projecting a film of this house onto the wall of his darkened classroom. Michael Kontopoulos, a senior finishing his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree this year, created and installed the projection, a video of his own eyes, filmed and projected into the window of his East End home. He created the project in response to a friend’s anxiety over a possible stalker, but it fit perfectly into an assignment in Khan’s class on Interactive/Reactive Environments. Students had to create a piece using projections. It’s just one of many “new media” tools they’ll learn to use — video, projections, electronic sensors.

New media is a different breed of art, one that uses digital technology the way some artists might use a paintbrush. But CMU has become well known in the field: From new-media superstar Simon Penny’s tenure in the 1990s, to a more recent stay by pioneering robotics artist Frank Garvey, CMU has always had one or two new-media “rock stars” on campus.

“There are a lot more [robotics artists] in Pittsburgh than there are in a lot of other places, because of CMU as well as the culture of the town,” says Ian Ingram, an emerging artist in the field. “It’s somehow just in the blood of the city… It’s a grittiness to robots — they exist in slightly greater zone. Maybe that’s a romanticized view of Pittsburgh, but somehow it seems to me that’s right for here.”

While CMU continues to attract internationally known artists such as Khan and promising students such as Kontopoulos, local exposure outside of the university’s campus has traditionally been limited. But a new generation of artists isn’t just putting Pittsburgh on the map. They’re making sure people here know about it as well — on- and off-campus. Philosophically, meanwhile, they’re more willing to confront the very technology that makes their work possible.

Despite the icy weather outside, Lawrenceville hipster haven Brillobox is packed on a recent Thursday night in January. But what commands the attention of the standing-room-only crowd is not some indie-rock band’s gratuitous posturing: It’s mild-mannered CMU professor and computer-music pioneer Roger Dannenberg.

Trumpet in hand, Dannenberg shows how his new foot controller allows him to trigger accompaniment for his instrument in a
live-band situation — pre-recorded samples whose tempo and groove change with the flow of a live performance.

This is "Dorkbot," a monthly gathering for those working on the fringes of technology, walking the blurred line between new-media arts and tech-product development.

Dorkbot's purpose was to provide a space for artists and technologists whose work, by virtue of its very cutting-edge nature, didn't fit into established genres. This somewhat amorphous mission is aptly summarized in Dorkbot's one-line mission statement: "People doing strange things with electricity."

"In the academic publishing and conference world, the only stuff that gets on a conference is stuff that's extending the state of the art — that people didn't know how to do before," says Dannenberg. "What I see at Dorkbot is people using stuff that exists, but they're very creative about it, and that doesn't really have a forum."

Begun in 2000 in New York City by Columbia University-based artist Doug Repetto, the Dorkbot concept soon extended to loosely affiliated franchises in tech- and art-savvy cities such as London and Tokyo. But it wasn’t until last year that Dorkbot took hold in Pittsburgh — despite what would seem like a ripe atmosphere amongst the CMU technorati and Pittsburgh’s other research hubs.

"It was after I saw that there was a Dorkbot in Minsk that I thought, 'What is going on? Why don’t we have one in Pittsburgh?" says local Dorkbot co-founder, and CMU art professor, Golnaz Beheshti. Levin wrote to Repetto with the intent of starting a local chapter and discovered he wasn’t the only one interested. Repetto had also been contacted by a CMU design student, Jet Townsend, and freelance computer whiz Drew Cellea. The three met up, and in April of 2006, held the first meeting of Dorkbot Pittsburgh.

ROBOTS ARE "SOMEHOW JUST IN THE BLOOD OF THE CITY. ... IT'S A CRIMINITY TO ROBOTS — THEY EXIST IN SLIGHTLY CRETINSVILLE. MAYBE THAT'S A ROMANTICIZED VIEW OF PITTSBURGH, BUT ... IT SEEMS TO ME THAT'S RIGHT FOR HERE." — ARTIST HAN INMAN

Since then, attendance at Dorkbot has been sizable, typically drawing crowds of between 50 to 75 or more people. And the event’s off-campus location is central to its goals.

"When it came time to plan the first meeting, [I thought], ‘Well, I can get a lecture room with a projector, and a bowl of pretzels,” says Levin. "But if we did that, it’d be only CMU students showing up. The rest of Pittsburgh would say, ‘Oh, it’s a CMU thing.’ We don’t want this to be a CMU thing. We’re working hard to get a non-CMU audience."

Much of the work exhibited at Dorkbot, after all, explores multiple artistic and technological disciplines, as well as elements of the culture we all have in common — like the creeping influence of technology on culture. The results can be both funny and somewhat chilling.

Take the work of Osman Khan, a visiting professor at CMU’s College of Fine Arts who showed work at November’s Dorkbot. Khan demonstrated several projects, which are collected as a series titled "Weapons of Mass Consumption," and which use a credit-card swipe machine to display information about those who interact with the installation. "Net Worth," for example, automatically scans the cardholder’s name through an Internet search engine, based on the number of hits the name receives, "Net Worth" ranks the user’s name in importance as compared to famous and infamous celebrities — all displayed on a large screen for everyone to see.

"It’s amazing how competitive people get," says Khan. "I’ve had professors [participate], and then actually go and do work on the Internet so that next time, they’d be ranked higher."

Khan’s work examines the tradeoffs we agree to in the name of technology. What values do we alter? What privileges will we relinquish? And what’s the value of Internet celebrity anyway? Amongst the top-level “Net Worth” names, after all, is a certain Osama bin Laden.

"I suppose I’m complicit in that [commercial] society by making pieces that play on it," says Khan. But, he adds, "There’s a narrative in all these kinds of products, and I’m just trying to twist that narrative."

"[It’s] almost like the way Warhol was, appropriating media and celebrity — he was still always the outsider."

For all their technological sophistication, Dorkbot artists remain outsiders...
of course, I’d say it doesn’t have anything that could remotely be called intention or thought. In the interest of observational clarity, I’ve always been very unwilling to ascribe any intention to a machine.”

Zeglin’s grappling with this fallacy led to his other contribution to MechanoSphere: a bird-like mechatronic installation called “Fledging.” By flitting up and down the vertical wire on which it “lives,” the fledging Rossum’s in the first place.

“I’ve kind of languished off on my own, and that’s been a hindrance to my progress,” says Zeglin. Watching Ingram explore the aesthetic potential of robotics, however, “helped me give myself permission to do it. [Normally], I’d shy away from ‘artificial life,’ and here’s something that’s pretty gleefully trying to be artificial life.”

As for the debate between robots-for-artists and robots-for-art-sake, Zeglin says, “It’s not a resolved question, which is why I’m doing the piece.” His “Fledging,” he says, is “what’s called a believable agent — where you say, ‘It doesn’t matter if something is intelligent or not. All that matters is how a person responds to it.”

PLAYING off people’s response to technology is at the heart of Golan Levin’s career — and it’s been a successful career at that.

Levin is one of the most important new-media technology artists working today. This year alone, his work will show at important new-media festivals and galleries in Denmark, Belgium, England, and at New York City’s Bitforms, the gallery that represents him. His pieces often stress interaction between digital technologies and human gestures, finding new ways to interpret movements, sounds and expressions with technology. For example, “Messa di Voce” visually interprets the sounds of improvisation.

DORKBOT featuring guests JASON SIMMONS OF GRADIENT LABS, and COMPOSER/CHOREOGRAPHER GRISHA COLEMAN OF HOT MOUTH is at 7 p.m. Fri., Feb. 23 at Brittbox, 4001 Penn Ave., Lawrenceville, 412-621-4900 or www.dorkbot.org/dorkbotph

ROSSUM’S SHOW MECHANO SPHERE featuring work by STUART ANDERSON, TAKEHITO ETANI, DOUG FRITZ, AMISHA GADANI, JOSEPH HAYS, IAN INGRAM, MICHAEL KONTOPOULOS, SHAUN SLIFER, GREGORY MITT, and GARTH ZEGLIN opens with a reception 5:30-8 p.m. Fri., Feb. 23 at the Three Rivers Arts Festival Gallery, 937 Liberty Ave. Downtown, 412-281-8723 or www.artsfestival.net

“The whole point of academic life is that results are shared,” says Zeglin. “Anything I’ve done [can be used by] someone else to turn into a weapon. And the converse is also true: Anything that they build I can appropriate and turn into art.”

At any rate, it’s an inescapable fact that the funding and impetus for technological innovation often stems from defense interests. And as Roger Dannenberg says, CMU has a culture “in which there’s no stigma attached to working across disciplines. Instead of, ‘Oh, he’s that guy that’s working with somebody across campus,’ like there’s something wrong with that, here it’s, ‘Oh, cool, you’re a [musical] working with someone in design!’ The Robotics Institute is a good example. It was formed as a collaboration between computer science, electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, and I’m probably leaving some out.”

Levin believes that this cross-disciplinary attitude could help Pittsburgh dominate the field of robotic art.

While many other places — like the San Francisco Bay Area, or Cambridge with MIT’s Media Lab — have reputations for new-media work, Pittsburgh could be the place where mechatronic art integrates itself into the cultural mainstream.

“Robotic art could be huge here,” says Levin. “Because of the unusual strength of robotics at CMU has, if we had three or five faculty in [specifically] robotic arts, we would literally just kill the field; we’d command it.”
Get your geek on

By Michael Machosky
TRIBUNE-Review

Attention all hackers, podcasters, circuit tinkerers, backyard robotics tinkerers, contraption constructors and electrical engineers — you’re not alone. Maybe your friends and family don’t understand why you think writing code is more relaxing than watching “Grey’s Anatomy.” Maybe your neighbors are suspicious of the strange lights flickering in your garage late at night. Maybe your significant other calls you “Dr. Frankenstein” under her — or his — breath.

If this sounds like you, you might want to check out Dorkbot tonight at Brillobox, in Bloomfield.

“The official tagline of Dorkbot is ‘People doing strange things with electricity,’ says Golan Levin, a professor of electronic arts at Carnegie Mellon University and co-founder of the local chapter. ‘It’s basically a community for people doing weird stuff with art, technology and electricity.’

At a Dorkbot meeting, you might see bleeding-edge research by some of the top minds in the local tech community — like Jonny Fargion of Downtown-based BodyMedia Inc., who spoke in September about wearable body monitors, woven sensors and the challenges of fitting computers into Levi’s jeans.

But meetings are just as likely to feature self-taught hobbyists like Pittsburgh-based musician and “circuit-bender” Kevin C. Smith, who made a presentation in November.

Now take children’s toys, like Speak & Spells and twiddles around with the circuits inside, get them to create completely different sounds, and record music out of them,” says Drue Miller, Dorkbot’s communications director.

Dorkbot was started as a sort of salon, or show-and-tell, in New York City in 2000 by Doug Repetto, a grad student at Columbia University. Since then, it has spread to nearly 40 cities worldwide.

“When I saw that it had spread to Minsk, in Belarus,” Levin says, “I said, ‘There’s got to be one in Pittsburgh.’”

Millar and J. Eric “Jet” Townsend, who recently moved to Forest Hills from San Francisco, contacted Repetto at about the same time. Soon, word was spreading among the local geek grapevine, and Dorkbot Pittsburgh launched to life.

Of course, it’s an open secret that Pittsburgh is a haven for geeks. This something you might not notice at first, with all the football going on.

Pittsburgh was named in this month’s issue of Wired magazine as one of the top 10 places “to get your geek on,” using criteria like proximity to top engineering schools and comic-book stores per capita. But Carnegie Mellon, and its bevy of robotics spinoffs and startups, was the main reason.

Levin didn’t want Dorkbot Pittsburgh to seem like a totally CMU operation. So it’s upstairs at Brillobox, a stylish but relaxed bar and performance space in Bloomfield. At each event, at least two presenters discuss their work, and demonstrate it, if possible. There’s also Open Dork, where people in the audience can get up and explain what they’re working on.

“It’s a fun venue for giving a talk because everyone is happy to be there to be entertained and educated,” says Garth Zeigl, a researcher at CMU’s Robotics Institute, who made a presentation in November. “I think the meeting includes academic artists; engineers, tinkers and hobbyists, but also an art-friendly, nontechnical crowd. So I tried to present the work as an art talk, with discussion of motivation and process, but also throwing in a lot of real technical details for those who are trying to build machines themselves. … I think that technically or artistically minded high-school age students would find this interesting.”

In his day job, Zeigl works on robots that walk or hop, but his art career has involved “technology unselfconsciously incorporated into sculpture.” He discussed some of his current work on “talking mirrors.” As a byproduct of Dorkbot, he’s formed a robotic-art working group, with a show planned for later February at 857 Liberty Avenue in the Cultural District.

“Our goal is to have every night have an art person and a tech person — if we have a person who does a little bit of each, that’s good, too,” Townsend says.

From the art side of things, Pittsburgh artist-musician Dave Mammeto gave a very energetic talk about video podcasting. He made video, uploaded it and showed how it works. Two other Pittsburgh-based artists, Alexi Morrissey and Damien Miller, presented something they call ‘WakeUp Call,’ that enables one to order a wake-up call from people reading spoken word poetry, or playing jazz.

From the tech side, “We also had a guy talk about scientific visualization work he’s doing for NASA,” says Townsend. “We’ve had a guy talk about hacking the TiVo — adding all these features that TiVo doesn’t support.” Most local Dorkbot chapters have their own vibe, and set of obsessions. New York’s Dorkbot is very “Art with a Capital ‘A.’” And San Francisco’s often explores social and political issues. Dorkbot Tokyo seems to be really interested in electronic music. So far, Pittsburgh’s is fairly informal and low key.

“They’re not saving the world with art,” Townsend says. “They’re doing cool little things in their backyard, or in their lab at CMU.”

Since geeks can be reclusive by nature, Dorkbot tries to maintain a very open, noncompetitive atmosphere. The presenters aren’t worried about others copying their work.

“I know there are intellectual property issues,” Townsend says. “The guy from BodyMedia isn’t going to reveal trade secrets. But I don’t think people are as worried about their ideas getting stolen as they are worried about people not showing up to hear their ideas.”

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Source Code: Programming
Eyebeam Style

PICK

Eyebeam
540 West 21st Street, 718.222.3982
Chelsea
May 31 - August 10, 2007
Reception: Thursday, May 31, 6 - 8 PM
Web Site

The first in a series of three retrospective exhibitions celebrating Eyebeam’s contributions to the art and tech field.

Eyebeam is pleased to announce a special exhibition of 14 projects from 10 years of residencies, fellowships and commissions in Eyebeam’s labs. The pieces featured have developed since their life at Eyebeam and/or will be reactivated with events, performances, and workshops demonstrating and sharing the process of their creation.

This exhibition is the first of three commemorating Eyebeam’s 10th anniversary and the organization’s unique role in supporting artists experimenting with or critically examining the impact of new technologies in creative endeavor. The Institution’s multiple channels of support include artist residencies, yearlong fellowships commissions and educational programs.

Source Code refers to the human-readable instructions used in computer programming that must be translated to machine-language in order to be executed; it also alludes to the roots, or “source code” of Eyebeam’s own origins. The works in the exhibition share the conceit of being parameter-based in that their conceptual thrust relies on fixed conventions, methodological or formal constraints which generate and transform meaning.

The noteworthy lineup of artists, technologists, hackers and programmers in Source Code demonstrates diverse and vibrant genres of creative exploration that defy easy categorization. The artists and collectives participating in the exhibition are: Cory Arcangel, Carrie Dashow, eteam, Nina Katchadourian, Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, MediaShed, neuroTransmitter, Steve Lambert, Alex Galloway and artists using Galloway’s Carnivore client—a surveillance tool for data network that serves that data to various creative interfaces called “clients” to make their work: Jonah Brucker-Cohen, Golan Levin, MTAA and Mark Napier.

Release of projects into the public domain is among Eyebeam’s mandates, which leads to re-appropriation or use of the source-code beyond Eyebeam walls, as illustrated by Carnivore clients.

The exhibition’s opening reception will be catered to, in part, by Steve Lambert’s Co-op Bar (2007), which offers a low-level investment and community space in the form of a co-operatively owned bar. Designed to take advantage of the surge in potential customers at an art opening, the co-op bar maximized profit by only serving hard alcohol: shots, mixed drinks, martinis, etc. Investors double their investment and receive a discount at the bar. As an artist or supporter of the arts, when you buy a drink at the Co-op Bar you are putting money back into the local arts community. A percentage of the profits from the bar will go toward supporting artists’ projects and services.

The Co-op Bar will be in service on specific dates and times during the duration of the exhibition, a schedule will be available online at www.eyebeam.org, for more information on the artists and works featured in the show see the below links.

Cory Arcangel Carrie Dashow eteam Nina Katchadourian Jennifer and Kevin McCoy MediaShed neuroTransmitter Steve Lambert Alex Galloway & RSG MTAA Jonah Brucker-Cohen Golan Levin Mark Napier

www.flickr.com

Here photos of this show? Tag them with artdcog2d41 to see them here.