New Media Counterpoint

by Eric Redlinger

Singing in a chorus in 15th century Europe looked something like this: you had your own part, individually printed, in front of you, with no hint of what the other parts might look like. There was no conductor. The duration of a printed note was highly variable. Deviating from and embellishing upon the printed score was the norm, and certain pieces were designed for entire vocal parts to be completely improvised, guided only by a few basic principles of harmony. Although the final sound was rich and full, the dominant compositional principle, counterpoint, highlighted the independence of each individual voice in the blend.

Collaboration in the new media sphere today feels a lot like what it looked like at the dawn of polyphonic music: a semi-ordered, semi-transparent, exquisite chaos whose effect is often judged more by the sum of its parts than by some manner of traditional criteria. In the contemporary real-time media performance landscape, video and sound artists, dancers (with or without sensors), digital poets and bloggers all coexist more or less amiably; gigantic free-for-all digital jam sessions such as events organized in New York by Share, a group of downtown artists and collaborators, at The Kitchen, OpenAir and other sites, thrive on few rules and much enthusiasm for uncharted territory. With the last two years seeing an unprecedented proliferation of software tools to mix video, audio, text, 3D objects and just about anything else that can be expressed on a computer in real-time, Vjs, Djs and other artists have been flocking to the medium. For the record, real-time implies performance -- the ability to edit digital data on the fly marks a significant milestone in the vitality of digital media for artistic expression, enabling truly new and original audiovisual instruments and a new breed of multi-disciplinary, tech-aware performers.

At the same time, new networking technologies and protocols are becoming available to enable data exchange between seemingly disparate genres. Using open standards such as OSC (open sound control) and older models retooled for network compatibility, such as MIDI (multiple instrument digital interface) over IP, a sound artist working with Max/MSP (a popular audio mixing and synthesizing application), for example, can share data corresponding to beats-per-minute, amplitude, frequency modulation or any other parameter directly with a visual artist, who may then use that data to control and modify a stream of corresponding digital imagery with exact precision. Add in a wireless network and this can all happen with minimal fuss. Some applications, such as the Waag Society's *KeyWorx* platform, have been created around a network from the very start, combining data synchronization protocols with media sharing technologies similar to those found in P2P applications to allow multiple networked performers to jointly compose a single audio-visual canvas. All of this nerdy innovation is not happening in a vacuum. The steady stream of international curators and festival invitations (members of Share will be featured for two nights this February in the prestigious Transmediale festival in Berlin) at the regular Sunday jam sessions in New York's East Village reveals that the art world is taking notice. The trickle-down effect to mainstream entertainment is also increasingly apparent. MTV may have backed out at the last minute on showcasing a 'team live' of prominent visualists mixing live video to the likes of Chemical Bros. for its New Years Eve artists showcase, but the writing is on the walls.