

Artspace Projects 2007

Alien Jukebox: Wade Marynowsky's *Autonomous Improvisation v.1*

Sean Lowry

A customized automated Pianola and a series of hidden networked computers programmed to control the selection and duration of pre-recorded video performances together present an ever changing audio-visual 'mash-up' of Sydney's improvised music/performance scene. The intermittent sound of the Pianola itself collides unpredictably with the strangely inhuman rhythms created by the random juxtaposition of thirty-seven pre-recorded performers projected across three video channels. Where else might you witness transgender burlesque, death metal, techno/toy gadgetry mixed up with a bit of classical avant-garde and didgibone? Welcome to the world of Wade Marynowsky's *Autonomous Improvisation v.1*, exhibited at Artspace from April 20 to May 19, 2007, a curious automated installation featuring various Sydney based performance artists and musicians pre-recorded to video in a controlled studio environment. In this strange automated audio-visual world, body paint, clown suits and gimp masks cut in out unpredictably together with 'serious' laptop musicians, knob-twiddlers and Theremin gesticulators.

Wade Marynowsky is a Sydney based new media artist who uses custom-built programs across a range of media (and under aliases such as The Pink Gimp, The_Geek_From_Swampy_Creek, AC/3P and Spanky). *Autonomous Improvisation v.1* is arguably Marynowsky's first major work, and was developed in conjunction with the Artspace residency program especially for exhibition at Artspace. For those familiar with Sydney's contemporary performance and sound art world, the video footage Marynowsky has produced for *Autonomous Improvisation v.1* also serves as an unprecedented archive of the work of artists Dave Noyze, Toydeath, Charlie McMahon, Adrian Bertram, Kristina Harrison, The_Geek_From_Swampy_Creek, Lucas Abela, Robbie Avenaim, Peter Blamey, Monika Pazniewska, Dallas Dellaforce, Jim Denley, Peter Farrar, Robin Fox, Brian Fuata, Dale Gorfinkel, Singing Sadie, Rev Kriss Hades, Ian Pieterse, Marty Jay, Josh Shipton, Hirofumi Uchino, Somaya Langley, Trent Mardan, Shannon O'Neil, Gail Priest, Rory Brown, Mark Selway, Milica Stefanovic, Matthew Stegh, Amanda Stewart, Pizzo (George Tillianakis), Clayton Thomas, The Toecutter, Trash Vaudeville, Jon Wah and Dave Slave.

Without prior knowledge, Marynowsky's strange bursts of cut-up noise and vision might appear like some kind of rabid multi-layered 'channel-surfing' symptomatic of an alien attention span even shorter than ours. Under digitally projected candlelight, the sound of the customised antique Pianola, coupled with the audiovisual menagerie of paradoxically generic individuals, intermittently appear and then disappear. Since all contributors were filmed individually under identical conditions (alone in centre frame and lit against a black background), a certain level of continuity is maintained despite the unpredictable cut-up nature of the exhibited projection. Again, without prior knowledge, we might be reminded of US artist Christian Marclay's impressive *Video Quartet* (2002), a four channel video installation simultaneously playing clips sampled from numerous popular and historical

films, all meticulously edited together to produce an strange yet cohesive mash-up of horns, whistles, voices, strings and domestic noises. From a soprano's trill to clashing cymbals to guitar feedback to gunshots and slamming doors, disparate visual elements somehow blend seamlessly with corresponding audio clips to produce a convincing symphony. Like Marynowsky's work, the audio in *Video Quartet* finally matters as much as the visuals. But Marynowsky has actually taken Marclay's audio-visual mash-up two steps further. Working neither with found footage nor a conscious compositional editing methodology, Marynowsky's system extends Marclay's 12-minute duration toward infinity. In a decade defined by durational video installation work it was amusing to watch visitors to *Artspace* sit patiently waiting for *Autonomous Improvisation v.1* to 'loop'. Others, once realising that it would never repeat exactly the same sequence, could be heard whispering, 'you should have seen what it did earlier!'

Since Marynowsky has programmed a computer to randomly trigger the length and duration of each individual performer's improvisation, he has effectively removed any compositional deliberation from the relationship between the individual contributors and their phantom conductor. This is where Marynowsky questions the notion of improvisation. Can a computer improvise? Considering that humans determine a computer's capabilities, the answer to this question is ultimately semantic. Improvisation involves a dialogue between the *thoughtful* and the *thoughtless*. Whilst Marynowsky probably experimented with the *kind* of random patterns appropriate for the work (certain parameters must be consciously determined), he has also devised a system in which some decisions are relinquished to automation. The outcome, like improvisation itself, is therefore the consequence of the dialectical interplay of two approaches. Some parameters are controlled whilst others are given over to chance. Conscious thought makes plans and then invites chance in to work to its end. Perhaps we sometimes recognise in chance that that we have been actively striving for in consciousness. At any rate, the uncanny (anti)compositional experience that is *Autonomous Improvisation v.1* exhibits the kind of strange poetry that could make the 'conscious' creative mind jealous.

Under the right conditions, complex patterns and sequences can emerge from the interaction of simple interacting events. Beyond art historical debates surrounding form versus content, formlessness constitutes that which stands outside such oppositionalities. Artists have long created systems or parameters in which events might unfold. Whilst the exact outcome might be unknown, a *kind* of outcome is expected. From abstract expressionism to Fluxus to so-called process art, whenever an artist has waited for something to rust, for torn paper to fall, for mediums to react with one another, for randomly cut up audiotape to be spliced together, or for an audience to interact with a performance, repeated activities are demonstrated to produce self-similar outcomes rather than specific outcomes. Since Marynowsky has devised the program, he has also designed the *kind* of outcome that it will produce. But in establishing the parameters within which the work will operate, the fact that its final configuration is automated does not necessarily imply that the technology is acting 'on its own accord'.¹

In that chance is commonly defined as something that happens unpredictably without discernible human intention or observable cause, what role does chance play within

Marynowsky's system? This question is of course confused once we consider that Marynowsky has consciously employed skill, taste and imagination to conceive a system in which chance plays a role. From Dada onwards, chance was considered central to the modernist enterprise of experimental artistic production. Located somewhere between conscious creation and random occurrence, between art and anti-art, or between the rational and irrational, the paradoxical question of chance in art is certainly nothing new. But many people still question the so-called artistic merit of facilitating the role of chance. The jury is still out on to what degree chance dictates the action of allowing paint to fall and splatter, let alone the idea of actually programming it. At any rate, beyond reiterating old yet unresolved debates, it should be noted that any artist can potentially encounter something unexpected in the nature of their chosen medium, and that that unexpected element may or may not be then exploited by the artist.

Since the mid-twentieth century, with the proliferation of performances, events, happenings, film, installation and, later, video, temporality has become an increasingly central theme in the arts. This relationship has of course been extended by the addition of machines to inaugurate and sustain the art action. The video documentation of performance-based work, once considered an outcome in its own right via the work of Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, freed performers of the necessity of interactivity with their audience. Acconci saw the video frame as somehow separating the artist from the outside world in an 'isolation chamber' in which he was intimately connected with his primary material. The video camera itself could represent the other. Marynowsky has extended this relationship to include the machine as arbiter of both who is in frame and for how long they remain there. Ever since Nam June Paik's 'video robots' shifted emphasis from the images displayed on the monitor to the visual impression of the monitor itself, the space outside the monitor or screen has also been considered as critically significant as that contained within it. Although Paik abandoned live performance during the 1980s, turning instead to multi-monitor video constructions, his connection to performance remained important. For Paik, it was as if the monitor was now a performer in its own right. By injecting frenzied movement into his installations, his video sculptures could appear like mechanised organisms rather than inert monitors. For Marynowsky, what is displayed across all three screens *and* the relationship between the projections and other physical elements within the overall installation are of equal importance.

Installation and video-installation's relatively easy passage into the inner sanctum of visual art criticism are arguably a consequence of their historical associations with more familiar practices such as sculpture. The installation of video was in part an acknowledgment of the importance of the space outside of the screen or monitor. In addition, video installation practices have extended video's attention to temporality. If time can be manipulated in multiple ways even within single-channel video, the possibilities are extended significantly with the use of multiple channels and screens. Temporality is unavoidably a concern for any artist working with the moving image. Add a computer to randomly trigger the length and duration of each video clip and time becomes elastic. Visual literacy, now no longer limited to the object, must now also embrace the fluid-ever-changing world made possible by and within the computer.

Duchamp's suggestion that a work depended on the viewer to complete the concept is now hyperrealised.

Dynamic video and new media installation practices not only reduce the degree of separation between artist and viewer but also see the role of authorship shift toward that of artist as *facilitator* of experience. Marynowsky's role as a facilitator of experience extends to both the role of selector and that of programmer. If it was Duchamp's radical shift of emphasis from object to concept that allowed for multiple methodologies to be redefined as artistic enterprise, the degree to which subsequent technological advancements have shifted the way in which contemporary art is both produced and experienced has given the Duchampian revolution some historical closure. With the arrival of new digital production methodologies and art forms, artists are now working so far beyond questions regarding materiality that many discussions surrounding the relative object status of a work now seem redundant. Is it ultimately a programming innovation that constitutes Marynowsky's work or is it the programming that enables the work? Are the performers themselves dispensable and therefore interchangeable? How might the work be transposed to another cultural context with a different combination of performers?

With experimental art forever expanding its collective and pluralist enterprise toward the expression of any concept via any means possible, digital technologies are understandably central to the cause. With many avant-garde tendencies increasingly defined in relationship with the most enduring revolution of the last century—the technological revolution—many artists are now more excited and enabled by the possibilities of technology than necessarily alienated by it. This tendency stands in strong contrast to the anti-technology prejudices that affected artists and counter-culturalists alike during the 1960s and 1970s. Much like the softening in attitudes that occurred in popular music (in which formerly elite technologies such as synthesisers and computers started to become the DIY bedroom programmer's alternative to the DIY garage band), digital technologies are now as central to cultural generation and dissemination as they are to the military. Interestingly, one of the most enduring offspring of the relationship between art and technology, the temporal arts, is also often its most ephemeral. Where happenings, installations, performances and later video made temporality central, the computer has allowed for multiple and intersecting temporalities. The viewer now enters a relationship with a machine that extends the art action across time. Just as cinema once provided a new and strange way of experiencing life, the computer is now seemingly and endlessly extending our experience of the uncanny. 'Notions of originality', as French critic Nicolas Bourriaud put it in 2002, '... are slowly blurred in this new cultural landscape' in which the programmer and DJ takes on the 'task of selecting cultural objects and inserting them into new contexts.'² Moreover, for Bourriaud, it is no longer about 'creating meaning on the basis of virgin material but of finding a means of insertion into the innumerable flows of production'.³ Ultimately, 'the artwork is no longer an end point but a simple moment in an infinite chain of contributions.'⁴ On the flip side however, in a world in which most images are instantaneously accessible, the artist is now far less likely to be regarded as any kind of specialised conduit for ideas or social orders expressed via image mediation.

According to the late Australian critic Nicholas Zurbrugg, although postmodern culture can be considered in many ways ‘apocalyptic ... superficial, weightless [and] static’, it is nonetheless finally capable of functioning more ‘profoundly’, ‘weightily’ or ‘radically’ when considered against ‘the complex creative potential of its ever-evolving technology’.⁵ If knowledge is a system within which individual elements attain value based upon their relationship to that system, Marynowsky’s system continuously overwrites those relationships. Although the experience of Marynowsky’s system will always be very different to that of any of the individual contributors, a different set of contributors would nonetheless provide for a very different experience of that system.

The challenge facing emerging and hybrid art forms is the need to generate and maintain a public. It is interesting to note that the audio and visual components of *Autonomous Improvisation v.1* function both inclusively and exclusively. Beyond elucidating sound’s role in creating or adding meaning to the visual or vice versa, with eyes shut and/or ears blocked, the work remains intriguing. This is therefore a work that might potentially appeal to both a visual art and an experimental music audience. Moving beyond contemporary (albeit much experimental) music, with its reliance upon repetitive and predictable rhythm structures, yet at the same time maintaining familiar structures *within* the individual fragments, it is refreshing to hear something that compositionally and rhythmically transcends the last half-century of relatively omnipresent 4/4 time signatures and rock derivative structures. The strangely inhuman rhythms generated within Marynowsky’s system together with the hybrid poetics of the installation itself certainly provide for myriad points of departure. Although technology is central to the work’s functionality, being far more than an exhibition of technological capability per se will certainly limit its date ability. At any rate, prepare to see and hear much more from Marynowsky and his alien jukebox incarnations. But please ... don’t bother waiting for it to loop!

¹ Wade Marynowsky, <http://www.marynowsky.net>, accessed 20/06/2007.

² Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, Lukas & Stenberg, New York, 2002, p. 13.

³ *ibid*, p. 17.

⁴ *ibid*, p. 20.

⁵ Nicholas Zurbrugg, *Critical Vices: The Myths of Postmodern Theory*, G+B Arts International, Amsterdam, 2000, p. 63.