

robotcowboy

Student: Daniel Wilcox
Advisor: Palle Dahlstedt

Abstract

This article presents my performance art project entitled “robotcowboy”. robotcowboy is a system worn by the performer that transforms them into a walking icon of our computer age in order to augment a computer music performance and act as a mobile platform for digital art exhibition.

Introduction

robotcowboy represents my work to present an engaging live presentation using both traditional and electronic instruments, as well as heavy visual elements. Coming from a more traditional performance/musical background, I am challenged with replacing the physicality of live performers with that of a computer. My laptop does not dance, sing, or run about on stage, yet it can be just as loud as real performers, leading to a discontinuity between the sound and the live action. The laptop itself is an inherent barrier between audience and performer, with the former focused on the screen and the latter wondering if he/she is checking email. It is an attempt to break this discontinuity by literally combining man and machine, performer and universal instrument, both visually and thematically.

Background

I am artistically motivated by the the cybersonics movement of Gordon Mumma [1] during the late 60's/early 70's which combined custom analog audio circuits with traditional orchestral instruments, the work of Stelarc [2], a man who truly wants to become a cyborg, the wearable computer movement pioneered by

Professor Steve Mann [3] at MIT in the early 90's, and the stylistic/musical trappings of the rock group DEVO [4]. I have combined my influences into the persona of a computer performer come to life - a robot representing the computer that has replaced my fellow musicians combined with own my physicality and human energy.

Implementation

Stemming from a concept I have been refining for the past 2 years, I have designed and built a computer monitor helmet with a functioning liquid crystal display screen from various obsolete computer hardware. Since my face is covered, I see through lcd video goggles and a small security camera mounted in front which is largely invisible from any amount of distance. The screen is driven by a wearable computer and the whole system is run on batteries with a maximum life of 3 hours.



Artistic Relevance

With my equipment on, I present an imposing symbol of our love affair with technology, our human need to personify the machines we interact with, and the notion that in today's world, we are largely dependent on technology. In fact, it is the technology that allows me to see when my head is covered and, paradoxically, the viewer sees my face as images on a screen while I see their faces in the same

manner within my goggles. This technology has handicapped my vision and movement as I believe it handicaps people today in many ways.

[4] "ClubDevo" [ClubDevo.com](http://www.clubdevo.com)
<<http://www.clubdevo.com>>.

robotcowboy is termed a musical project in that it also provides a mobile platform to take my digital art work directly to the public on the street - outside of the traditional art gallery environment. I do not believe that new media / digital art can be shown in the same context as traditional artistic mediums such as paintings and sculpture, but that the technology that drives it should be harnessed for interactivity. robotcowboy allows me to literally wear my art on my "face".

Actions Thus Far

The initial phase of the robotcowboy project has culminated into both a performance at Pusterviksbaren in Gothenburg on May 15th and a performance/installation entitled "Recharge" which took place at the Spring Exhibiton for the Art and Technology program. The second phase has led to several performances throughout Gothenburg in the fall of 2006.

Future Plans

The second phase of the project will allow me to function autonomously and with full remote control of the electronic sound. The third phase will utilize wireless technology for collaborative interaction between the audience and the performer. The entire project encompasses my ongoing thesis work.

References

[1] Electronic Music Foundation. "Gordon Mumma."
CDeMUSIC.com
<<http://www.cdemusic.org/artists/mumma.html>>.

[2] "STELARC" [stelarc.va.com.au](http://www.stelarc.va.com.au)
<<http://www.stelarc.va.com.au>>.

[3] "Steve Mann's bio" wearcam.org
<<http://wearcam.org/bio.htm>>.