

Vocograffiti Wiimusic

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In her analysis of information theory, N. Katherine Hayles writes that “pattern and randomness are bound together in a complex dialectic that makes them not so much opposites as complements or supplements to one another” (Hayles, 25). She uses both digital encoding/decoding and genetic mutation as prime examples of the interrelationship between pattern and randomness, which has replaced the earlier paradigm of presence/absence. Digital languages and virtual reality have constructed coded linguistic networks more complex—seemingly more rational, yet truly more abstract and volatile—than Lacanian floating signifiers.

Vocograffiti Wiimusic fragments patterns and orders randomness on multiple levels in a collaboration between audience, users, and computer. Audience members use their mobile phones to call a phone connected to the computer, which records their messages and incorporates them into the music. Users operate three Nintendo Wiimotes, which control iteration rate/playback speed/sample length of the vocal audio, audio effects/sine and phasor tones, and drum/bass/harmony layers. Depending on the performance setting, audience members may participate in shaping the music with the Wiimotes.

“Randomness...is implicit to the very idea of pattern, for only against the background of nonpattern can pattern emerge” (Hayles, 33). Vocal graffiti simultaneously define and interrupt patterns of drums, bass, and harmony, spraying their fragments onto the loops’ existing structure. Random segments of these vocal files are iterated on subdivisions of the pulse; microtonal sine and phasor tones, sounding at random pitches within a user-defined range, also appear on beat subdivisions. Users may audibly erase or speed up the beat—a disappearance of the pattern—but can appear again at any moment. The vocal inputs alter their own kind as well; each new phone call writes itself into the computer, obscuring, though not completely erasing, the earlier vocal files which emerge in sampled forms. Most of the harmonic layer is fragmented itself, created through granular synthesis, which extracts tiny particles from an original sound file, repeating, layering, and warping them into a new whole.

Binary oppositions, having infused most of our society long ago, have often been destructive to progress; for instance, the separation of mind and body has aided and sustained patriarchal structures, associating men with the mind and women with the body, and valuing mind over body (Grosz, Chapter 1). This work seeks to transcend not just the dichotomies of presence/absence, fragment/whole, mind/body, performer/audience and male/female, but subject/object, human/machine, art/popular, concert/club, and even concrete/abstract. It is our hope that at least during a live performance of *Vocograffiti Wiimusic*, listeners and participants will question dichotomous thought in favor of more fluid, contemporary communication.

Sources

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.