

From the issue dated December 3, 2004

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v51/i15/15a05601.htm>**NOTES FROM ACADEME****People Doing Strange Things With Electricity**

By DANIEL ENGBER

New York

The mechanical innards of a photocopier are strewn over the table in front of Douglas I. Repetto, a teacher, artist, and systems manager at Columbia University. On the floor near his feet are a couple of bird cages, three flat objects that appear to be slices from a tree trunk, and more pieces of the machine he has just dismembered. He twirls a plastic gear absent-mindedly between two fingers. "I think I'm working out some guilt," he says.

A looming wall of gray-green metal, covered with dials and sockets, fills almost half the room. This massive, old-fashioned computer has been living at Columbia's Computer Music Center (formerly the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center) since 1957 and is one of the first modern electronic instruments ever built. Its official name is the RCA Mark II Sound Synthesizer, but its nickname is Victor.

Although he has only been at Columbia for four years, Mr. Repetto -- who teaches art classes with titles like "Electronic Sound in Art" and "Movement-Sound-Image Interactions" -- shares a studio with Victor on the third floor of a converted milk-bottling plant in Harlem. The Computer Music Center has existed for almost 50 years; today its staff comprises three full-time employees, including Mr. Repetto. "We're sort of a tumor, or maybe a goiter, on the side of the music department," he says.

Mr. Repetto never expected to be teaching at a place like Columbia and working at the oldest electroacoustic music center in the United States. "I was a horrible, horrible student," he explains. "I thought I was going to be a manager at Blockbuster when I arrived in New York." But since receiving an M.F.A. from the California Institute of the Arts in 1997, both of his teaching positions -- he was at Dartmouth before coming to Columbia -- have been at Ivy League universities.

Mr. Repetto doesn't think of himself as an Ivy League type, and to a certain extent he has tried to make up for his glamorous teaching gigs by reaching out to the geeks and weirdos outside academe with whom he clearly identifies. A few months after he started teaching at Columbia, in the fall of 2000, he coordinated the first meeting of "dorkbot," a monthly show and tell designed "to give us all an opportunity to see the strange things our neighbors are doing with electricity." He hoped dorkbot meetings would provide a venue for frustrated electronic artists without the connections that come with a fancy degree, and give people with "zero credentials and zero potential" the chance to present whatever weird stuff they happened to be working on.

Even in New York City, those people can be hard to find, says Mr. Repetto, whose artistic life at Dartmouth was conducted mostly online. So why not get like-minded people together to talk about their latest electronic sculpture, interactive-video project, homemade instrument, or robotic plant? Why not

organize a monthly community meeting for dorks?

At November's meeting, held at an art gallery in SoHo, Mr. Repetto plays host to, among others, a pair of programmers who have designed a cellphone interface for a drum machine. Their presentation consists of a grid projected in front of the audience, next to the number for a cellphone belonging to one of the programmers, John Watkinson. The phone is hooked up to a laptop-computer-based drum machine, which audience members can control by sending text messages from their own cellphones to Mr. Watkinson's.

His fellow programmer, Matt Hall, explains how the interface will work: The grid on the screen represents the available drum sounds on one axis and the sequence in which they will be played on the other. Each text message the audience sends will place a mark somewhere on the grid, and the computer will add that sound to a repeating rhythm track. As people add more marks to the grid, the rhythm will grow more complex.

Mr. Hall surveys the room while the audience waits for the software to load. "This could be a total nightmare," he says.

Moments later people flip open their phones and start tapping out text messages. A bass-drum line appears first, followed by a few marks in a different row -- a pitapat on the snare. Soon a flurry of beats has speckled the grid and filled the gallery with a chaotic but catchy rhythm.

Within a few minutes, someone in the audience has figured out how to change the tempo, and the collaborative percussion degenerates first into a speeded-up blur of bangs and crashes and then into an excruciating funeral march.

"I don't mind at all if it gets a little geeky," Mr. Repetto says the next day. He wants to make it easy for people to present art projects and ideas about which "no one else is ever going to care." In some cases, he adds, "we may not care, either."

Over the years the meetings have remained open to anyone who wants to participate. Mr. Repetto has avoided publicizing dorkbot -- "I didn't want it to become the hip thing for a few months, and then disappear" -- but word of mouth has spread. A page on the dorkbot Web site (<http://dorkbot.org>) offers the following invitation in small text: "What, there's no dorkbot in your city? Well then maybe you should start one!"

Sure enough, dorkbot communities have begun to emerge around the world. At least 20 other groups meet regularly, in places like London; San Francisco; Lisbon; Melbourne; Rotterdam; Barcelona; Bombay; Sofia, Bulgaria; and Bahia, Brazil. Mr. Repetto offers each a Web page, dorkbot.org e-mail addresses, and some basic advice on how to run a meeting. Beyond that, every dorkbot is an independent operation.

Robert G. Ray is the chief technology officer of an Internet start-up in Chicago and the organizer of a dorkbot group there. He has never been to one of the meetings in New York, nor has he met Mr. Repetto. "I just e-mailed him one day and was like 'Hey, looks like there isn't a Chicago dorkbot and I'd like to start one.'"

Very few of the dorkbot organizers have spoken directly with Mr. Repetto. Dorkbot in Madrid was started by a graphic designer, Aitor Méndez, and a journalist, Javier Candeira, after Mr. Candeira saw something on the Internet about the dorkbot groups in New York and Barcelona. He started to wonder: "Why don't we have this cool thing in Madrid, too?" Their second meeting will feature an artist building

an electric guitar from scratch in less than 20 minutes, using only scrap materials, wire, and pieces of furniture.

Several of the groups in this country meet on college campuses, though participants are not necessarily students. An instructor at Full Sail Real World Education, a media-arts college in Florida, helped to organize a dorkbot in Orlando, along with a software engineer who used to work with him. Dorkbot-SoCal, which is run by Garnet D. Hertz, a graduate student at the University of California at Irvine, has held meetings at both the Irvine and Los Angeles campuses of the university system and at a Hollywood special-effects studio. And the original dorkbot in New York often meets at Columbia's Computer Music Center.

Columbia also sponsors ArtBots, Mr. Repetto's annual robot talent show. An international art exhibition for both robots that make art and robots that are themselves art, ArtBots has been getting bigger in each of its three years. The most recent show, this past September, attracted several thousand people to a converted fur warehouse next to a live-poultry market in Harlem. "I started this in reaction to events like Robot Wars, where stuff gets cut in half," says Mr. Repetto, referring to televised competitions in which homemade robots battle each other with saws, spikes, and aluminum mallets.

This year at ArtBots, a sensitive and talented robot from Minnesota took home the artists' choice and audience awards, for using a magnet and a steel ball to trace intricate floral patterns in a platter of sand. But true dorks might have been drawn to the entry across the room from the winner, a lonely wedge of tree outfitted with mechanical arms and legs. It lay still for a moment -- a block of wood in a tangle of metal limbs -- and then erupted in spasms of helpless movement, as if the log were trying in vain to clamber to its feet. One could have spent half an hour looking only at this sorry robot with zero credentials and zero potential.

"That's the most pathetic thing I've ever seen," someone told its creator, William Tremblay, who watched over it like a proud parent.

"Thanks," he said.

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