

Thomas Rickert and Michael Salvo interviewed by Dave Rieder

Mike Salvo

Ok. The recording is going.

Dave Rieder

Well, I'm going to start with a real simple question. I just wanted to actually ask if you could give a brief overview of the kind of music culture that was at the heart of the piece in Computers and Composition but obviously especially the Kairos piece. You know, you are talking about Garage Band, you're talking about what I think now would probably in part be called mash-up music culture. I'm just wondering if you can talk about the context in which that piece of yours was developed in terms of technology and music at the time.

Thomas Rickert

You want to start?

Mike Salvo

Well, sure. I was really excited about having Garage Band. I'd just made the switch from PC to working more with Macs. Garage Band was this really interesting tool. Even the title, "And They Had Protools," was something Wayne Coyne said... imagining what musics were going to be possible. I just been thinking about things like surround sound movies. I'd just set up surround sound in my basement. You know, trying to think about what Zaireeka, the Flaming Lips album in four parts, what that meant for performance in different spaces. And Thomas and I just started hanging out in my basement. He'd just introduced me to craft beer, and so we were spending time listening to some really good music and drinking some good beer. And I think after a couple of weeks of doing this occasionally Thomas looked at me and said, 'We can write about some of this.'

Thomas Rickert

Um, I had been starting to flesh out some of the deeper implications and concept of ambience. I'd already written one essay on it, and it was based on the work of Brian Eno. So, I was already starting to think of other ways in which technology, new media, and music were intersecting. I flash back to bands like the Beatles or Yes in particular because of the ways they orchestrated all of these different elements together in order to create something more akin to a more truly immersive aesthetic experience. You've got the artwork. You've got the music. You've got the light show. You've got the lyrics. You've got gestures toward outside culture. And then, when we get to the present day, the potential that bands have just greatly expands because you have all this digital forms to work with now. So, Michael and I started talking about how some of the bands that we were aware of were doing that, like the Lips and Sigur Ros in particular for me, and other stuff like that. So, we were trying to figure out how is it that bands evoke and enter the world or create new pathways for, as Ingold talks about it, lines. We can think of these as lines of significance and aesthetic evocation. So, we were interested in theorizing that in some

sense. Not just in terms of the music, but in terms of, well, if we think about this as part of the ground for exploring what new media is and can be then we can make that argument. And how would we illustrate and illuminate that argument?

Dave Rieder

Well, related to something that you were talking about just a minute ago, there's a moment in the intro to the Kairos piece when you say, 'New media culture is less resonant with interpretation than with engagement, and to explain this experiential difference we deploy the concepts of wordling and prosumer.' Um, I'm really intrigued by this notion that music - and I would say other areas of composition - have moved away from a kind of, you know, interpretive framework toward one of engagement. I mean, how? What would you want to say about that now, since the publication of the Kairos piece?

Mike Salvo

Well, I think about how everyone who saw the Sex Pistols wanted to make a band. For me, that's a moment that sort of illustrates. We didn't want to talk endlessly about what we were seeing. We wanted to do it. And teaching myself - teaching ourselves - how to create podcasting. Podcasting was just nascent in 2005, 2006 when we were writing this piece, and so the best way to learn how to create podcasts was to do podcasts. So, we had written this essay, and I wanted to create something to go with that essay. And so, we started playing with music, and we spent a lot of time mixing things up, using found sounds, trying to create a mash-up that reflected the kind of work that we did. And so, here I found this Wagner piece and mashed it up with something that was brand new, just released by the Flaming Lips, and it still sounds wild. I can't imagine that for a lot of people who were downloading it and listening it for pleasure. But it was a heck of a lot of fun and also immensely rewarding to start to play with these technologies and to understand how they were working. And so, when I listen to the Flaming Lips, I'm not thinking, 'Oh God, I want to write about this.' I'm thinking, 'I want to participate in this. I want to make something.' And so I think about that moment where, you know, we get this stadium rock and there sort of this staid '70s 'This is Big Album Rock.' And then you get the Ramones and then the Sex Pistols and MC5. These early punk bands saying 'Screw it.' Tearing it all down. Start again. [Hard to understand.] And suddenly the really incredible moment where you see the Sex Pistols and you don't want to write about punk. You want to get a guitar and play it. And you want to get your friends together and play.

Dave Rieder

Well, ok. That's awesome. I really love that description. I personally could not agree more of the idea of less talk and more doing, you know? But there's an ambivalence in the humanities and in our field toward that. You see it in the ambivalence in composition toward creative writing. You see it in some of what Geoffrey Sirc has talked about the movement away from just talking about pedagogy and what's going on in the classroom in a process-based way to just scholarship, itself. You know, he kind of laments a bit of the way the field has professionalized. And I think about the quote unquote provocativeness of

someone in digital humanities proper like Stephen Ramsay, who talks about what digital humanities is about is building. It's about making stuff. And he got in trouble with some people at MLA for saying that because he's basically saying 'Stop talking and make stuff.' So, I'm just wondering if you can talk a little bit about the ambivalence. I mean, yea, there's excitement in wanting to, you know, build and to make, and to stop talking or stop doing criticism. But it just seems so hard to get away from that.

Thomas Rickert

I think one of the things that we were doing is engaging precisely that question. But we were engaging it at several different levels. But one of them is, if we are going to take new media seriously, then you have to take seriously the way it engages the full person, the full sensorium, and not simply significance, not simply literacy narrowly understood, which has been the dominant focus of the field. And so, music became a key flash point for that. But even there, if we look at how new media first entered the field, everyone focused on the visual as if that was the only thing to support. Sound got dropped out. That's interesting, that sound got dropped out. The reason is is that we don't have a semiotic for understanding it, whereas we rapidly developed one for the visual. Visual rhetorics were hot immediately and immediately gravitated toward a semiotic, like that [unclear].

Dave Rieder

Let me jump and cut you off right there, just so that I can ask this question directly related to what you just said, which is why, if we look at the excitement around the visual and the lack of excitement around the aural or the sonic as symptoms of disciplinary limitations, then, disciplinary, where are the investments in our field that we aren't able to engage with music or with sound as well as with the visual?

Thomas Rickert

We wrestled with this in terms of the field is so committed to significance across the narrow band of print-based literacy. Anything that falls outside that bandwidth, which is pretty narrow, is just not interesting or not teachable or yada yada yada. And if does come in, it'll only come in in terms of achieved critique or criticism. And that's why that guy got in so much trouble at MLA.

Dave Rieder

Yea, yea.

Mike Salvo

Well, I also want to bring up how privileged sight is in Western Culture. Interestingly, blindness allows insight, and so, you have that Miltonian sense of the genius of being trapped in your unsighted world. Whereas Lennard Davis and with his Disabilities Studies Reader and then his - he's the hearing child of deaf adults, deaf parents. And he writes about how often he encountered being dismissed. So, we have that deaf = dumb. Sound is not privileged in the way that sight is privileged. And text as an input is also a sighted

privilege. And we also don't hear text in privileged form. It would come in through feeling, touch. Go through a Braille reader. So, disabilities studies are getting a different insight -- see, even that language, insight; whereas, we can be blind to the truth. And so all these different metaphors that we operate by reveal these values that we have. And hearing really is an underutilized sense in the multi-sensorium and in the multimodal. That is changing with podcast - that sound is something you bring with you. And we were talking about different modes, exercising and things. We listen to books now. We listen to texts. We hear podcasts. We hear some great ideas. So, these things are breaking down, but we still have a long cultural history of privileging sight way over sound.

Thomas Rickert

I was reading R. Murray Shafer's great book Soundscape for class the other day. He made a great point there that I've been reflecting on because I'm also teaching classical rhetoric right now. And, of course, classical rhetoric was formed in an oral culture, and its one attuned to hear it. But he points out that the concept of the divine in the Ancient World was always described in musical or sound-based, sonic terms. It wasn't sight-based. I mean, you had your figures of gods, but in terms of the larger notion of the divine, it's like the Pythagoreans. It's some cosmic chord. It's the music of the spheres. It's sound-based. So, that's an index for how... there was a turn. As print entered the culture and took over, and that turn went hand-in-hand with the devaluation or an insensitivity to the role of the sonic. It's gets us to the next point, which is that if you are going to start tending to the sonic, it requires you to start tending to more than simple significance, especially with music. That opens up production because you can't just write about it any more. You have to find other forms of engagement. And that led us to prosumer. That led us to all kinds of stuff.

Dave Rieder

Yea, that's just really fascinating. You brought up Ingold. You brought up ancient culture. One of things that I really liked about Ingold's book Lines is he asked and answered a question that was one of the bases for the book, which is when did music lose its voice? He talked about how up until the early medieval period, you didn't have music without vocals, without lyrics, without voice. And when the notational practices for recording sound became robust enough, comprehensive enough, then music or sound could kind of separate out and become an object of its own inquiry. And it's interesting to look at what you guys are talking about because, in a way, it seems like now the notational practices, which are embedded within a computational environment have become even more radically robust and sophisticated to the point where we're kind of going somewhere even beyond sound. Or, if you're talking about how sound now is part of an embodied worlded kind of creation, I'm just wondering if there's anything that you can talk about in that context. You know, because the technology is fundamentally changing what we think is music now again.

Thomas Rickert

I couldn't agree more. One of my peccadilloes is the term multimodality. One of the reasons I don't like it is because it assumes that there's modalities and that you have to put them together. Actually, it's the reverse. What you have is an immersive, evocative environment that you engage. And then, from there, through forms of attention or other work, you pick out the particular modality. So, in other words, the field has already put the cart before the horse, and now we're trying to push back through with this term multimodality. And that's a symptom of how we'd already picked and chosen from our life a particular modality - a narrow bandwidth, if you will.

Dave Rieder

Yea, yea. Part of what you seem to be talking about... Do you want me to stop? Did you want to add something, Mike?

Mike Salvo

No, no. Go ahead. I'll fit it in.

Dave Rieder

So, I'm looking at your piece in Kairos, and you also say 'New media culture has reached a point that one can compose on a laptop, sample, loop, produce mash-ups, and thereby create heretofore unknown musics.' Maybe this speaks a little bit to my kind of lack of knowledge of music, but it just seems like mash-ups are a really big thing these days. Maybe it's a legacy that goes back to collage and montage, avant-garde forms of invention and creativity, but I guess... are mash-ups an important thing right now? Do you see that as an important engine for innovation in other areas, like composition studies proper?

Mike Salvo

Well, I think about the Grey Album. It's the White Album being mixed. I always think of that moment. I don't know if the mash-up is important now as it was when we were doing the piece. But I do still think about - what's the DJ from Pittsburgh who is making new music from snippets of the old? And then it's become a parlor game, to try and figure out what song is being sampled, where this piece came from and where this other piece came from. And I think in that way, he's sort of mastered that part of the mash-up. But I keep going back again and again to cultural rebellion and resistance, and thinking about the ways in which - I always use the short-hand [????]. Each of these forms of music is revolutionary: it's going to destroy culture and everyone's afraid of it... for about five minutes. So, hip hop, mash-up, remix - remix is going to bring about the downfall of the regime of copyright. You know, artists who are learning how to use mash-up are creating whole new markets, and creating whole new genres of music. And, so, to try to hold on, to control commercial limits, is ridiculous. So, now you are seeing backlashes on artists who are holding to tightly to control are getting fan backlashes. You know, but to go back. Hip hop was so revolutionary in so many different ways, and you mentioned Sirc. And so what he did, what Sirc did, to talk about that composition... we feel like we're adding to that tradition, and Sirc is talking

about adding to that tradition of composition that went back to rock and roll - and to really take seriously rock and roll composition. And then to take hip hop composition seriously. Take remix composition seriously. If composition had been big when bee bop was this scary, revolutionary music, we would have had pieces about bee bop and about the crazy improvisational music that they were doing. You started talking about musical notation, but all of these things get consumed and get rearticulated and familiarized and naturalized, renaturalized, and the news of any rebellious or revolutionary potential over and over and over again... and I think the key element is understanding when that moment is when [its] at the peak of cultural impact - and finding a way to participate in it. And I think that is why I continue to go back to punk and post-punk... and I'll leave that to Thomas to talk about his prog interests.

Thomas Rickert

I was going to talk about how the mash-up is like a very visible example of something that's always been true. Perhaps we're more aware of it - that is, integration of any form music or form of expression with technology. So, we're looking at that intersection as well. I mean, take somebody like Frank Sinatra. 'Considered perhaps the greatest single voice in the Twentieth Century, and we tend to think, 'Well, he developed that.' His crooning style is indelible for the age. But, actually, he was only able to develop that with advances in microphone technology that could pick up the more subtle vocalisms. Without the microphone technology, you don't have Sinatra. And so, the mash-up speaks to the capabilities of a certain technological age. Perhaps it's kind of hot because copyright law is so tight, which gives it a slight frisson of rebellion to do that. [unclear] Artists are adapting to their technological environment. I think we need a term like exaptation, so that we have a kind of ecological and evolutionary spiral, where every advance creates new conditions of possibility that people build out of. So, the mash-up may still have a certain cache, but for how long? New things are going to emerge out of what that makes already possible. [unclear]

Mike Salvo

Well, and I want to go back further and talk about the end of the Civil War. Suddenly, you have all of these martial instruments, spread all over the South. And you have a new class of people who are getting together into groups, playing a new music that reflects an African heritage and a South, an American South, that feeds into this Delta Blues mentality, which is what the Rolling Stones were coming over and looking for as authenticity. But you have an entire musical style, unique in the world - American jazz - that comes out of the end of the Civil War. And these instruments being scattered. And so - what is the word that you're suggesting?

Thomas Rickert

Exaptation.

Mike Salvo

Exaptation, where you get folks who are picking up these instruments, and who are pleasing themselves first with music, and then it gets picked up and distributed. And you get this tradition of American blues, of American jazz, that comes out of the availability of instruments. And these martial forms that are so key to that development of Dixieland Jazz. I mean, you can hear the martial beats in some of the early recordings. I mean, it spread out to Mississippi, to St. Louis and then all kinds of styles of blues - Memphis blues, Memphis jazz - that comes out of that tradition of, that ecological... these were things that were available. What do we do with it? How do we make these things make sense to us?

Thomas Rickert

So we say things like 'Frank Sinatra, cyborg.'

Dave Rieder

I mean, listening to you guys for the last five plus minutes, it's exciting, it's really inspiring. And I'm just, I found myself wondering, if I were a graduate student and I want to make a band now, what kind of band is that going to be? How could you guys help me as a graduate student think in really new ways about what it means to be in composition studies? Like if you want to put it in the context of a graduate course, if I'm not supposed to talk any more and just write about someone else, then what am I actually doing? Inspired by what you all are talking about?

Thomas Rickert

Well, certainly forms of engagement and production that we're only now discovering. Some of them may work with new media, but why all of them? I mean, we've already got mobile technologies, which you, yourself, are already talking about. We've only scratched the surface there.

Dave Rieder

So, let me ask this follow up question directly related to that. I kind of feel like, oftentimes, when we try to do stuff like that from our discipline, it's difficult because that's the purview of another discipline. For example, if I want to do an immersive environment, I might be playing into computer science or art and design. So like, so how do we tell a graduate student who really wants to do that kind of engagement that there in composition studies when they do it? Like, I, you know, it seems like there's a difficulty in a disciplinary structure of being innovative.

Mike Salvo

One of the things is I always describe this piece as a gateway. Geoff Sirc's was a gateway for me. The tagmemics piece, and it helps me to understand what rhetoric and composition were at the dawn of the Twentieth Century. And so, in hearing what you're saying, I'm not

so concerned with what composition becomes or what we can do. I'm thinking this is the great Kairotic moment, the twentieth anniversary of the journal. When we start putting it together, I was asked all the time as a grad student, 'What are you doing this for?' Your time should be spent on producing essays for CCC, or time should be spent producing an essay for an established print journal. And what I said was, 'I'm learning so much from doing this.' It doesn't really matter what the outcome is. And I know Thomas was a big part of creating Enculturation and Electra(Lite) came out at that same time with Victor's group at Arlington at the time. You know, there was so much excitement. And I was much less worried about what I'm gonna do with this or how it's going to become a career and much more attuned to what am I learning?, how am I learning it?, what is it going to become? We only make sense of things in hindsight anyway, and so now it seems inevitable that Kairos would be continuously publishing for twenty years. Every year for twenty years, it has never been certain.

Dave Rieder

Yea.

Mike Salvo

So, what were we doing when we were trying to do this? We were trying to give ourselves opportunities that weren't available any other way. What were we doing when we were making this piece? I don't know that we're ever entirely sure of what it could be. But I know that...

Thomas Rickert

That's the ambient moment.

Mike Salvo

Yea, and I know that I was enjoying it, and I was learning from it, and it enabled me to think about things in new and fresh ways and ways that I hadn't been able before. So, if someone came to me and said, 'You know, I want to do this.', or, 'I want to be in a band,' or 'I want to make music,' I would say, 'Ok. That's great.' But then the rhetorical challenge is -- and I think this contradicts the alphabetic a little bit but -- how can you explain, or what argument do you use, for why this is an important engagement, a valid way of working through this... that material. How does this contribute? And I think that's the real thing about making knowledge. When we are most unsure, when we are most insecure, when we are dangling, that's when we're making knowledge. And sometimes it's a complete failure. But history has a way of pairing those things away.

Thomas Rickert

And the flip side of that would be the great quote from Alfred North Whitehead. He says 'Knowledge doesn't keep any better than fish.' Yes, we're making new knowledge. It's not going to lay around for ya. You gotta keep making new.

Dave Rieder

Alright, well let me be a little bit silly with this kind of question, you guys sound a bit like neo-expressivists. You know? It's all about the process. How I feel. Are you guys the Peter Elbow of punk composition studies? How would you characterize this shift - considering the ambivalence that our field has had toward expressivism. Where, how do you reconcile that ambivalence with that new media turn toward engagement, immersion, and a kind of process as the new hermeneutics of knowledge?

Thomas Rickert

Well, we all recognize that feelings

Mike Salvo

'Nothing more than...'

Thomas Rickert

...feelings and other rhetorical [unclear] never go away. You just hide them. Mask them. There's no rational that's not also hand in hand with the emotions. We've seen a huge amount of work in a variety of fields that is demonstrating this. Rhetoric has always said this. Now the neurosciences are saying it. Moral psychology is saying it. And sociology says it. Political science is getting in on it. Even economists are starting to consider the possibility that we're not rational economic people. So, perhaps its... more forms of... ways of building on forms of knowledge that are really right there for us.

Mike Salvo

Return the repressed. It's what we say we're not doing. And then others will come and tell us what it is we're doing.

Dave Rieder

Yea.

Mike Salvo

I'm just not... I don't worry about it so much.

Dave Rieder

So, by the way, part of that question, that kind of moment of provocation with like Peter Elbow and whatever - I can edit that out if that's stupid.

Thomas Rickert

No, we liked it.

Dave Rieder

Ok. Cool. I couldn't... I didn't know if it sound good after all. It sounded good in my head before I said it, but you know.

Thomas Rickert

Well, I think one of the reasons Greg Ulmer's work is so important is because that's what a mystory does. It engages forms of digital literacy and it puts who you are back into whatever that research and the making of knowledge is.

Dave Rieder

No, I just, you know. I mean, we both studied with Victor, Thomas, and there was definitely... he was concerned about that 'third rail' of expressivism, like of being painted with that brush back in the Nineties. And, yea, I don't think that's as exigent a concern now, but it's interesting to note how you guys have said in so many eloquent ways that new media culture, the direction in which we're going now, is toward ambience, emotion, pathos -- all the kinds of things the West has always characterized as bad or irrelevant or irrational.

Thomas Rickert

...'problematic'...

Mike Salvo

I think one of the things I'm really excited about - you said the direction that we're going - and I think what I find so interesting is that we're now in a place where multiplicity and directions, not trajectory but trajectories. And the multiplication of differences and those slight gradations where you have multiple multiplicities and all these different things coexisting where we can represent multiple lines of flight happening simultaneously. You know, we keep going back to sensors and adding this different technical electronic sensors that collect data for us. One of the things that that does is it allows us to collect multiple streams of information, and I think that's what's exciting. One of the things that got me into this field was I was really excited about the historiography that was becoming possible through technology; so, this goes way back. This goes back to what I was driven to in my dissertation, and trying to see how historiography was being multiplied, and the way that these hugely complex stories, like the history of the Holocaust being told by fifty thousand survivors, who, according to Lyotard's differend (that's the line of the denial) - so, how do you tell the history from fifty thousand simultaneous perspectives, any one of which may have an unimportant inaccuracy. But that inaccuracy is anathema to traditional historiography. And so, when you say, the direction that rhetoric and composition is headed, I'm more excited about the possibilities of all of our directions, and the ways in which... people are talking about the problems of composition being fragmented. That is an exciting thing for me because we can sustain all these different inquiries and all these different lines, So that ambient, theoretical, pedagogical, feminist, disability, technological... and they weave together, and they inform each other in really interesting multiple forms.

Thomas Rickert

I'm glad you mentioned feminism because feminist theory has been making the argument that we need a richer conception of the human for decades. And now we can see how these arguments resonate with, dovetail with other things that are emerging. And so, there's synergy.

Dave Rieder

Yea, well if I can use it as a segue, Mike, you talked about all of these new trajectories and directions. I really enjoyed that description. It's interesting because I have heard, as somebody who goes to Cs, 'Oh yea, Cs. What is it now. There's so many things. How do we kind of...' I really like that found a way to kind of flip the script on that negative description of change into a real positive way. That's really great. I appreciate that. But, anyway, related to the idea of directions and trajectories as a multiplicity, where are you guys going now in your work? What kinds of work are you doing right now?

Thomas Rickert

I'm trying to write a pre-history of rhetoric where I go back to figures who have not been accepted, or thought about as integral to the development of rhetoric, and trying to argue that they are. Including the pre-Socratics and going a bit further, I may even do some stuff on paleolithic cave art, which is in my mind the first multimedia environment.

Dave Rieder

I think Leroi-Gourhan would agree with you. So what do you hope would be the implications of that kind of work? I mean, to broaden out a history of rhetoric in that kind of way, what would that do for the field?

Thomas Rickert

Well, it also brings in potential forms of knowledge, of engagement, that we tend to either not deal with in the field or if we deal with them it's always a sort of rhetoric vex. But what if they're already part of who we are and what we do, and how would that change our field's stories about itself? For the pre-Socratics, there's an engagement with the divine, revelation, and with healing - that part and partial with their 'philosophical' explanations. Philosophy, of course, only takes that one little part, but they're far richer. And even Aristotle grants that pre-Socratics were an important in the development of rhetoric. Aristotle says that Empedocles developed rhetoric. So, I want to start teasing this stuff out and see what happens.

Dave Rieder

Mike?

Mike Salvo

Well, I think you hear why Thomas gets things done. He's got one project that he's totally invested in, he's working on. I've got a bunch of things going on. The most directly related to the sound work is I've got an essay that I'm working on the Clash right now, but seeing the band the Clash in a global context. So, there's a brand new documentary that's out that's about rock and roll in Cambodia. And the Kh`mer Rouge murdered an entire, well, Frank Sinatra. There was a Cambodian Frank Sinatra, and any visible rock and roll'er in Cambodia was killed. Folks who are telling the story of this time in Cambodia's history are telling it from the perspective of survivor guilt and how 'I wasn't a back up signer, I'm a laundress' was at the core of survival. So, talking about rebellion, this is an interesting moment. So we're looking at that rock and roll in Cambodia, Kunkin in Korea, and why the Indian sub-continent seems not be producing. There's an indigenous music culture, so they're not producing the same kind of visible musics. So, I'm very interested in that. I'm also working on a project about sound and healing. That's along the lines of what Thomas was talking about. Experience and loss, and one of the ways that my wife and I dealt with that is by going to a lot of live music shows. And so, it became really interesting, like an Old 97s show, realizing that the bass is moving my body, and I can feel it. And my heart is syncing up with that beat. And to think about how that changes your interaction and the creating of that mass experience. And then in my professional and technical writing side, I'm also exploring with Liza Potts some work - experience architecture. But those themes were there in nascent form when we're talking about drum sets in stone basements, how that ambient rock and roll sound is produced by what you are surrounded by. So, part of my problem is that I've got all of these different things trying to get them done simultaneously.