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 Research Paper 1
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Remix and the Celestial Jukebox – The Contemporary Artist as Cultural DJ

We live in the age of remix. Not just an appropriative phase, but an *era* of remix as cultural mediation—where recombination is a fundamental approach to cultural exchange (Manovich 1). Remix is the language of the Information Age¹, the coinage of Post-Postmodernism², rooted in long-developing systems of commercialism and communication. The very fiber of our social connectivity rests in an endless rewrite of materials, mashups,³ pastiche and database sensibilities, intrinsically tied to everything from Google searches to language, television, art and text.

Remix is a manipulation and integration of cultural space, wherein the author-reader generates (and regenerates) moments in a self-curated, postproduction world. The resulting experiential theater is populated by fragments drawn from diverse sources, spinning elements

¹ Recognized as the period in human technological history following the Space Age and associated with the Digital Revolution.

² The period immediately following Postmodernism. Theorist Alan Kirby considers Post-Postmodernism, or Digimodernism, a paradigm shift that ruptures existing cultural relationships: “Digimodernism identifies as the critical event in contemporary culture the profound and shattering encounter between computerization and the text. Its most recognizable form is a new kind of digitized textuality—onward, haphazard and evanescent—that disrupts traditional ideas about authorship and reading...” (“Successor States...” Kirby). I would argue that it erodes the broader concept of ‘text’ itself, re-orienting the idea of the original.

³ Common in music, a ‘mashup’ is a combination of elements, often overlaid, which results in a new composition that may retain recognizable elements of the sampled material. To cite a form of remix culture at its most ubiquitous, today’s ‘mashup’ page on Wikipedia defines the process as: “a song or composition created by blending two or more pre-recorded songs, usually by overlaying the vocal track of one song seamlessly over the instrumental track of another. To the extent that such works are “transformative” of original content, they may find protection from copyright claims under the “fair use” doctrine of copyright law.” The term ‘remix’ and ‘mashup’ are sometimes used interchangeably, though ‘remix’ offers a more complex description of the variability of appropriation, recombination and transmutation of elements than ‘mashup.’ ‘Mashups’ can also refer to hybrid, overlaid apps and programs (Manovich 1).

with a cross-cultural, archival impulse that is both eclipsing and fragmentary.⁴ Remix in contemporary art is the ‘appropriation’⁵ of the 21st century, no longer the re-photography of Richard Prince, but a mutable landscape that uses a vast media-archive of memory and material: referred to here as the Celestial Jukebox.⁶ It is a manifestation of the filter bubble’s⁷ “parallel but separate universes” and the ghost-in-the-machine of convergence culture (Pariser 5).⁸ Remix is bigger than the art world, bigger than commerciality—an invisible, increasingly normalized framework that provides strategies for communication and interaction. Conscious use of remix allows contemporary artists like Jennifer & Kevin McCoy and Anthony Discenza to build an

⁴ DJ Spooky suggests that “our semantic web is a remix of all available information... the result is an immense repository—an archive of almost anything that has ever been recorded” (Miller).

⁵ ‘Appropriation’ is the preferred art world descriptor, in place of ‘remix,’ ‘mashup’ and ‘rewrite’—bound in part to cultural notions of ‘remix’ as copyright violation. ‘Appropriation’ grants a sense of acceptability. Theorist Lev Manovich believes “... ‘remixing’ is a better term [than appropriation] because it suggests **a systematic re-working of a source, the meaning which ‘appropriation’ does not have**” (“What Comes After...” Manovich 4). When we remix, we rework previously existing cultural works (“What Comes After...” Manovich 2).

⁶ “Celestial Jukebox” stems from a 1995 US Government white paper concerning media flow and consumer access. The paper “invoked the image of a technology-packed satellite orbiting thousands of miles above earth, awaiting a subscriber’s order—like a nickel in the old jukebox, and the punch of a button to connect him to a vast storehouse of entertainment and information through a home or office receiver combining the powers of a television, radio, CD and DVD player, telephone, fax, and personal computer” (Goldstein 187). Since then, theorists like Paul Goldstein and Lawrence Lessig have broadened this idea, adapting it to suit its obvious relationship to data pooling (Wasow). It describes not only services like Netflix or Hulu, but also the Internet, and the ‘Cloud.’ It encompasses an entire database—a universe—of information, images, sounds, video, experiences... it describes the Information Age itself, not an idealistic subscription-based service. It is Manovich’s cultural database (“What Comes After...” 5).

⁷ Social theorist Eli Pariser refers to the “unique universe of information for each of us” (9), which are “parallel but separate” (5) as we navigate and extrapolate information and experience from the filtered digital experience. Search engines and websites use algorithms that constantly filter and adjust what we see, denying the idea of a free, democratic web, while simultaneously allowing us to completely privatize and customize our knowledge base.

⁸ ‘Convergence Culture’ is a concept developed by Henry Jenkins which describes a fundamental, information-age paradigm shift (243): “Convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content... spectators perform in the new media system” (Jenkins 3). It also recognizes a new kind of participatory culture, the fractured nature of parallel but separate realities and data streams (not unlike theorist Fredric Jameson’s recognition of language privatization) and the ability of culture recipients to “construct [their] own personal mythologies” from a stream of information (Jenkins 3). Convergence culture relates to an integration of media, data formats, art and styles—“convergence thinking is like interdisciplinary thinking” (Jenkins 12).

interrogative, self-reflective investigation of the Information Age itself. The artist becomes a cultural DJ, a manipulator of archival compulsions that leads to “a kind of hunter-gatherer milieu...” (Miller). Such artists draw from the Celestial Jukebox, remixing, mashing and re-contextualizing material—providing a “systematic reworking of a source,” grounding individual perspective in a de-centering of authorship (Manovich 3). Investigating contemporary recombination also critically anchors my own body of video work, where remix and manipulation open dialogue about the nature of televisual space-time, recollection and iconographic culture.

Remix informs Postmodern (and Post-Postmodern) discourse and remix *culture*⁹ eclipses older forms of Modernity. Awash in theorist Fredric Jameson’s “sea of private languages¹⁰,” (Foster xv) we weave our own specialized (and spatialized) cultural tapestry by flipping channels, downloading, uploading, using customized apps, mixing ideas and considerations from the varied media we encounter. Amateur videographers create entertaining audio-visual mashups like *Gangnam Busters (Psy vs. Ghostbusters)* and apps like *Breaking News* filter and distribute resources by remixing formal journalism with social media reports, further customized by end users. This shift from a read-only to a read-write culture not only parallels the endless hypertext

⁹ According to theorist Eduardo Navas: “...remix culture can be defined as the global activity consisting of the creative and efficient exchange of information made possible by digital technologies that is supported by the practice of cut/copy and paste. (1) The concept of Remix often referenced in popular culture derives from the model of music remixes which were produced around the late 1960s and early 1970s in New York City with roots in Jamaican music. (2) Today, Remix (the activity of taking samples from pre-existing materials to combine them into new forms according to personal taste) has been extended to other areas of culture, including the visual arts; it plays a vital role in mass communication, especially on the Internet...” (Navas)

¹⁰ Frederic Jameson claims pastiche is used in Postmodernism due to the erosion of the idea of a linguistic or cultural norm as a result of increased language privatization (130). Jameson was concerned about growing linguistic bubbles that would generate parallel, but separate, paths of interaction. He, of course, was still holding on to the notion of Modernist universality.

(and intertext) of contemporary life, but also the inherent nature of digitality itself: objects and experiences can take on countless forms, functions, versions and revisions (Wasow)(Paul 70).

We participate in remix culture daily. Users combine and re-combine material via web browsers, smart phones, remotes—even iPod playlists exhibit the inherent mutability of information. Media is consciously and unconsciously appropriated, collaged and adapted, blurring the line between copy and original, further inverting the author-reader relationship (Paul 27).¹¹ New media scholar Lev Manovich suggests remix is penetrative—touching popular and private spheres, social interactions—even political platforms (1-2). More than data, “our lives, relationships, memories, fantasies, desires also flow across media channels” (Jenkins 17) and we play DJ with the media that forms our daily lives and memories, whether we cite a favorite movie or share a meme. Scholars like DJ Spooky (Paul Miller) even suggest “unlimited remix” is “the artistic and political technique of our time” (Miller qtd. in Manovich 4).

Not only is this collagist, archival impulse rooted in database logic and the growing Celestial Jukebox, Miller also suggests it is fundamentally tied to human neural syntax. Our minds search, sort and associate material rapidly, connecting vast distances or instantaneous expressions by drawing on our accumulated knowledge, much of which is derived from popular culture, folded into personal history. We marry interior and exterior conversations, gathering material from all aspects of society and media—and this self-curated archive is how we encounter the world, and indeed, “when recorded, adapted, remixed, and uploaded, expression becomes a stream unit of value in a fixed and remixed currency... traded via the ever-shifting

¹¹ This kind of “deejay culture [itself] denies the binary opposition between the proposal of the transmitter and the participation of the receiver” (Bourriaud 159).

currents of information...” (Miller). Critical Art Ensemble¹² posits that in “the age of the recombinant” (84) the contemporary ‘plagiarist’ “restore[s] the dynamic and unstable drift of meaning, by appropriating and recombining fragments of culture. In this way, meanings can be produced that were not previously associated with an object... or...objects” (86).

If most play DJ to navigate their daily lives, what happens when a contemporary artist *consciously* makes use of remix? As we encounter the data cascade, “[we] construct our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow... transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives” (Jenkins 3). This pronounced hypertextuality¹³ of information allows contemporary artists to mix style, medium and influence, developing the privatized, remixed language Jameson feared, while addressing the interconnected mythology of the Information Age itself.

Digital artist Grahame Weinren suggests “the digital revolution is a revolution of random access” and our jukebox becomes an archive of material ripe for sampling and re-contextualizing (Weinren qtd. in Paul 15). This paradigm shift is “based on the possibilities of instant access to media elements that can be reshuffled in seemingly infinite combinations” (Paul 15). New media artists Jennifer and Kevin McCoy make use of these reshuffled, infinite combinations by subverting linear television narratives with interactive installations. *Every Shot Every Episode* (2001)(Fig. 1) excerpts *Starsky and Hutch*, separating moments from the original narrative and suspending them in a virtual database where viewers can choose sub-categories to view (such as “Every Stereotype” or “Every Gunshot”) (Paul 101-102). User agency allows

¹² A new media collaborative.

¹³ “Hypertext” refers to the plastic referentiality of text (and information) made possible by electronic devices. There is a sense of immediacy and interconnectivity within non-linear space. Branching structures resemble trees, galaxy filaments or network superstructures.

personalized exploration of culturally revealing categories in a wall-mounted CD library. There are no ‘proper’ ways of viewing the work, no official sequence. Users can watch as little, or as much as they like, in any self-determined order. Though drawing on finite source material (the 1970s TV series), re-contextualization through digital remix changes the static nature of the original episodes and the formality of the no-touch museum object, forming new cultural associations within a digital (and remix) perspective.¹⁴

Similarly, Anthony Discenza remixes video, focusing on manipulation of the televisual experience as a way of negotiating the mind-numbing deluge of contemporary information, which he suggests leads to “a profound level of alienation, a gradual poisoning of our own experiences...” (Norrena). Discenza draws from the corpus of mass culture, playing with scholar Hal Foster’s idea of “alternative knowledge” or “counter-memory” using sampling, sharing and remix (Foster 144). Discenza’s mode of remix in older pieces¹⁵ like *Suspension* (1997) and *Phosphorescence* (1999) uses an accumulation of sampled media images, borrowed from channel surfing or videotaped from magazines. The images are blended, looped, cut and otherwise remixed and degraded. In *Suspension* (Figure 2), the uber-familiar faces of celebrities and models form a shifting lattice, where features become as interchangeable as the commercialized icons themselves. The rhythmic video-movement of features are set to an ethereal, detached soundtrack that matches the distorted procession. Both hypnotic and dampening—we lose the individual, in favor of pop iconography as modular (commercial)

¹⁴ Similarly, *I Number the Stars* (2004) breaks the original Star Trek series (season 1) into artist-defined typologies, hinged on states of being. The clips are also assembled as a video CD archive, for customized play and shuffling.

¹⁵ Discenza applies this approach to newer works, like *Charlton Heston: The Future Has Already Been Written* (2010), which ties three Heston films as an interspersed, co-existent mashup. The films are interlaced, switching between narratives every 1/10 of a second, forcing the viewer to reconsider the relationship between each apocalyptic narrative, the reliability of media, and broader political associations of end times and war.

implementation. In *Phosphorescence* (Fig. 3), Discenza mediates the act of channel-flipping, allowing amorphous shapes to emerge, tide-like, gradually revealing figures and text, only to retain an unresolved televisual identity. The uneven audio mimics the viewer's erratic course through layers of colliding (and dissolving) information. Culling the Celestial Jukebox allows Discenza to present re-contextualized data, while critically addressing the fleeting, unstable nature of media representation.¹⁶

My current video work, (part of *The Cascade*,¹⁷) makes use of sampling, remix, overlay and audio-visual painting to investigate the structure of televisual experience, the nature of video iconography and the role of landscape¹⁸ as a performative elastic-space. *So I Asked...* (2014)(Fig. 4-5) and *Elevator (Finding a Way Out of Here, I Hope)* (2014)(Fig. 5-6) combine heavily manipulated video footage with digital stills, generating a layered, meta-referential web. They investigate ways of dimensionalizing the television experience, addressing the nature of real vs. constructed space; in this case, the California landscape as mediated by now-historical footage. The dialogue between the actual, the fictional and the geologic conflates location with

¹⁶ Discenza employs Nicolas Borriaud's notion that certain "strategies of reactivation and deejaying of visual forms represent a reaction to the overproduction or inflation of images" (162). Discenza's conscious "goal is to destabilize the act of viewing itself, in the hopes of revitalizing the ways we engage with this both ubiquitous and unseen world of images" (Norrena).

¹⁷ *The Cascade* (Project) is an interdisciplinary body of work rooted in a personal connection to the Southern California landscape which permeates American television from the 1960s-80s. I excavate instances of the conceptual space-place of the Mojave Desert and its entanglement with the very real, the vividly scripted and the culturally iconic. The videos are one aspect of my three-part consideration of landscape as conceptual elastic-space and its relationship to televisual place, which includes painting and digital stills.

The LA County of my youth carries personal, regional, cultural, and international levels of understanding and history, intensified by its presence in television narrative. The Cascade suspends geographic traces once removed from their physical location by the original television filming and again removed by the act of capturing a temporal, or remixed, instant. The environments thus inhabit the actual, the imagined and the transient place of recollection, emblematic of a collapsed space conflating personal history, geologic reality and cultural production.

¹⁸ In *The Cascade*, landscape functions as a site of cultural and geologic exchange and occurrence.

time, becoming a site of activation. As such, the clips are an earnest inquiry into the collision of personal mythology and regionalism, drawn from physical space-place and television culture. Material is adapted from my self-curated, cultural tapestry and the viewer is presented with a fractured, painterly system of echoes that flirt with narrative, but deny resolution.

The time-collapse of seemingly linked events in *So I Asked...* involve paramedics who appear to be responding to a shooting.¹⁹ *Elevator...* also deals with paramedic iconography as multiple crises overlap, but never resolve. The viewer experiences the distilled, but ultimately unreliable, essence of an hour-long drama in the timeframe of a television lead-in, heightening tension while unfolding interior-exterior conflict. The remixes engage the real, the vividly scripted and the culturally iconic, a reminder that television fantasy takes place in a *real* space (actors, locations and filming), but that *televisual space* is mutative and elastic, capable of affecting attempts to measure time and narrative. Paramedics and victims complete cycles of intertwined past and present—in this case, before, during and after *perceived* rescues (or failures).²⁰ I emphasize the unstable, almost-narrative by allowing moments to rhythmically rebound, like the circling helicopter, key dialogue, or the squad rushing to the scene. These recoils form ‘choruses’ that seem familiar, yet constantly shift, offering understanding of characters and events only by viewing a mosaic of remixed behaviors, not linear segments.²¹

¹⁹ Because we understand how to ‘read’ television drama, we can recognize purposeful fracture and suggestion of connectivity, even sorting out who might be the hero and victim, or that a hero or victim need identification in the first place (Fiske 16). It is not necessary for viewers to recognize the specific footage that has been remixed, as cultural familiarity with the television medium itself will allow them to establish a system (however destabilized) of latent content, thanks to audience expectation (Fiske 62).

²⁰ Overlapping moments exist over time, in the same condensed segment, not across physical space, though they may appear to occur in the same location.

²¹ The videos deal with the conflation of time and space (physical and scripted), a conversation made possible by remixing material from the shared Cultural Jukebox. As television theorist Richard Dienst suggests, “the image of

Remix enables endless re-contextualization and meta-cycles, where works reference themselves (and larger Information Age considerations). It makes media-referent dialogues in contemporary art possible, like consideration of information overload, conflation of video with space-time-recollection, and analysis of cultural motifs at play in socialized pop culture. The inherent mutability of information is the matter of Post-Postmodernism itself, the crux of contemporary digitality, speaking to the flexible nature of media and the intertwined reality of information culture. Contemporary artists, therefore, make use of the Celestial Jukebox as a mode of language and disruption, reflection and integration, developing work that applies an open-ended formula, inverting the author-viewer relationship, indulging variation and using interactivity to remix their own work.

television as world promises immediacy and intensity, where all possible subjects and objects are co-present to each other” (12). The videos are the space which activates my project iconography.

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Figure 1. *Every Shot, Every Episode* (2001). Jennifer and Kevin McCoy. 277 DVDs with sound, carrying case, and LCD monitor. Installation shot at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 2. *Suspension* (1997). Anthony Discenza. Video. Audio score by Jason Kleidosty.



Figure 2. *Phosphorescence* (1999). Anthony Discenza. Video.



Figure 4. *So I Asked...* (2014). Ren Adams. Video.



Figure 5. *So I Asked...* (2014). Ren Adams. Video.



Figure 6. *Elevator (Finding a Way Out of Here, I Hope)* (2014). Ren Adams. Video.



Figure 7. *Elevator (Finding a Way Out of Here, I Hope)* (2014). Ren Adams. Video.