

Convergences in creating and understanding digital art: Interview with Richard Karpen

By Roberto Simanowski

No. 24 – 26.07.2002

Abstract

Richard Karpen is Professor of Music at the University of Washington in Seattle where he has been teaching composition and computer music since 1989. He is also Director of the UW Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media. Karpen is acknowledged as one of the leading international figures in Computer Music for both his pioneering compositions and his work in developing computer applications for music composition and sound design. His works are widely performed in the U.S. and internationally. Roberto Simanowski talked with him about the aim of the Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media and the relation between digital media and academic world.

dd: Artists working with digital technologies are redefining art, music, theater, film, and architecture, often dissolving the boundaries between these traditional forms. How does this affect the way to deal with art?

RK: Digital Art goes far beyond merely affecting how artists work, and beyond simply using computers to simulate pre-digital forms of art. Artists, engineers, designers, and scientists collaborate and exchange roles to create digitally-realized images, sounds, performances, and installations that have never before been heard, seen, and experienced. The Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media at the University of Washington is creating a community of artists, engineers, designers and scientists who, working together, will create new arts genres with new techniques and new aesthetic ideals.

As in the sciences, many of the current arts "problems" to be solved are too complex for a single artist to undertake. I think that it is pretty clear that collaboration between artists and between artists and those in different fields is one important way for us to go forward. I also believe that the paradigm that splits artists and engineers into

"content providers" and "tool designers" is not appropriate in the experimental arts. It might work for in some cases for design and for entertainment, but not for the kind of serious art-making that we are encouraging in the new Center.

dd: What is the aesthetic specific of digital art?

RK: I would not say that there is a specific aesthetic of digital art. But perhaps there is a digital arts world-view that is emerging. I think it is, in fact, a rather ancient world-view that has come back to the foreground for artists working with digital media. It is one in which artists are inventors of technology rather than consumers of it. Many of my colleagues in the digital arts are fluent in engineering practices and deeply involved in the physical sciences. They see their work along with that of scientists and engineers as part of the continuum of human discovery.

There is a symbiotic interplay between technology, imagination, science, and expression in which artistic vision inspires the development of new technologies, visionary technologies and scientific discoveries reveal unimagined new artistic directions, and art, technology, and science converge, resulting in new forms of human expression and new ways of experiencing our humanity. It's a Renaissance ideal and it is crucial that young artists be given the opportunity to train more broadly in the sciences and engineering than has become our normal modality at universities. The new Center at the University of Washington seeks to have a profound influence on the next generation of artists by promoting this view of the convergence of the arts with the sciences and engineering.

dd: Which department is this Center affiliated with and what is its education mission?

RK: The Center stands uniquely as its own program within the College of Arts and Sciences. The faculty will be drawn from Art, Music, Drama, Architecture, Cinema Studies, Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, Physics, and other areas. But it will offer its own curricula and degree programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels (including a PhD in Digital Arts).

Undergraduate and graduate courses in Computer Music, Digital Video, Computer Animation, Design, and beyond to Experimental Media Art are supported by the Center. It provides students with an environment to pursue their own individual and collaborative research projects working side-by-side with faculty and guest artists. The education and research missions of the Center will be seamlessly interconnected with one another. Research and education will promote wide-ranging knowledge of arts and technology subjects, cultivating partnerships that bring together the visual, aural, theatrical, and architectural arts with engineering, sciences, and other areas. Students involved in this program will themselves be important contributors to the invention of new technologies and creation of new forms of artistic discovery and expression.

dd: The Digital Arts Center seems to work as a stage on which all diverse areas of art converge. What consequence does this have for the audience? New ways of art surely require new ways of approaching art. As the artists have their place to learn, discuss, and experiment how to produce digital art the audience should have a place to learn how to 'read' it. Doesn't the interdisciplinary collaboration in making digital art dramatically change the nature of research and teaching? Which department is most likely to do the job: literature, film studies, painting...?

RK: The question concerning the consequences of the convergence of disciplines for audiences is really interesting. I've been experimenting with exhibitions, concerts, and other events that combine on the same programs or settings new works of computer music, computer animation, live interactive video in performance, and more. What is wonderful to me is that this brings together a much more diverse audience that one sees at events and shows containing one genre or quite related genres. Suddenly an "art audience" is confronted with serious computer music that is beyond anything they might have imagined possible in the aural domain. Or the "avant-garde music audience" comes face to face with the work of an artists working with experimental media that they would never have taken the time to see. Then there are the works that make these audiences wonder, "is it music or art"? So in producing shows and events that are reflections of the diverse, interdisciplinary nature of the digital arts we attract audiences from a similarly diverse cross-section of the public. Perhaps the music audience is primarily coming to hear the music and the art audience is coming for the new media work. But what they encounter is something that they didn't bargain for. We're doing this and it's working wonderfully. For many it is obvious that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts!

With regard to the nature of teaching and research, we are boldly experimenting with our curriculum. I can't say I know exactly what I'm doing, but I know that we must make changes in our arts curricula and just as in the process of making art, making a new arts program will require some adventurous thinking and taking some risks. In other institutions where the different areas of the arts have developed programs in the digital versions of their area, they often are initiated and maintained isolation from one another. I believe that the vision for our Center of a fertile interaction among these individual arts fields that fosters broad and deep understanding will strengthen each of these separate disciplines. At the same time our emphasis on interplay and convergence will create opportunities for new forms of art to grow that diverge from more narrowly defined or confined landscapes now offered in many academic settings.

One of the things that traditional arts curricula offers, whether in schools of art, music, drama, is some rigorous training in fundamental principles. It's so important for emerging artists to gain a strong discipline but we have not clearly defined what that should be for digital arts. One of our challenges is to develop rigorous sets of courses without creating new ideologies. I am always asking of my colleagues in

the arts, what is really necessary for young artists to know and what do we just want them to know be that is what we learned. I'm trying to make sure I ask myself the same question as we move towards developing this experimental curricula. Discipline is the road to artistic freedom, but we need to differentiate between discipline as a state of mind and discipline as fundamentalist doctrine. The former, is of course, what I'm referring to. The latter can, unfortunately, be found rather commonly in our arts institutions.

The processes of imagination, exploration, discovery, and reflection constitute the core of artists' work. Artists- like scholars, scientists, and engineers- seek to make discoveries that will improve our lives and our understanding of the world. Art as serious research is neither a new phenomenon nor a new ideal. The search for and communication of artistic discoveries cross cultures and spans time. I feel particularly lucky to be working as an artist and educator in a time of such exciting possibilities. We really can't predict what art will be like fifty years from now and what is most exhilarating to me is that we are in a position to create historic new breakthroughs that will determine much of what the future will be like. To me this is a moral stance. We have received so much from the artists of past centuries and I believe that we must try to make similar contributions and to ask of our students to do the same.