

A Soa(pOp)era for laptops



A performance piece By

GH Hovagimyan & Peter Sinclair

This work is by nature developmental. The presented form, in which technical solutions and research into vocal communication interact with the more commonly recognised artistic practices of writing words, organising sounds or designing spaces, proffers a new understanding of the creative potential embodied in the use of computers.

A Soa(pOp)era for Laptops **by G.H. Hovagimyan and Peter Sinclair**

A Soa(p Op)era for Laptops uses Apple Powermac laptop computers with native Macintalk software and Opcode Max object oriented programming. For the "stage production" two more Powermac desktop models and a data projector are used to generate the immersive sound environment and backdrop animations. Briefly the Macintalk program allows a user to type text into a computer that can be read back in a variety of voices. Embedded commands allow for the voices to sing, speak slowly or rapidly, screech and mumble onomatopoeisms. The stock voices that come with Apples' text-to-speech program such as a womans', a mans, a childs', a laughing voice, sci-fi aliens, synthetic computer-like, bells, prescored musical program, singing and so forth allow for a new type of characterization and caricature. The voices function as puppet/ doppleganger saying things more readily than an actor or performance artist might. These "cyber marionettes" present a challenge to our human sense of self. These shadow selves have an honored position in art and myth. They are the Leprechauns of myth or the Puck of Shakespeare's "A Midsummers Night Dream." The Apple Macintalk voices are familiar to a growing portion of the population. The voices have their own personae in the world as recognizable as any human actor. This then is the basis for a new cybernetic milieu and the inspiration for A Soa(p Op)era for Laptops. As with any group of fictive characters their interrelations become the mirror of human relationships observed.

The basic structure of A Soa(p Op)era for Laptops uses laptop computers on radio controlled vehicles. The radio controls are operated by artists working on the project. Movement by the laptop/vehicle relies on a telematic idea, of a person projecting themselves into the vehicle. The physical manifestation of four laptops moving around a stage/arena presents a metaphor for the more abstract notion of networked consciousness. Using laptops that are essentially known as business tools and radio controlled cars favored by children creates a certain sense of bricolage, and adds a wry playfulness to this work.

The human/computer interface creates a starting point or conceptual arena where the actual piece exists. There are several interlocking and interdependant layers that constitute the fabric of the piece. For instance, approaching the work from a programming perspective Sinclair along with Laurent Pottier of the GMEM (Groupe Musicale Experimentale du Marseille) set about the task of having four separate computers communicate among themselves and respond to embedded sound cues. The solution which they came up with uses the macintalk voices to sing notes which can be recognised by a pitch tracking device. In order for one computer to respond to a sound cue from another, physical proximity (the microphone from one must hear the sound generated through the speaker of another) is called for. This dictates the range of movement the computers have and how the action develops. What the audiences sees is movement which is not necessarily about punctuating a dramatic moment but rather facilitating the ease of communication between the synthetic actors.

The sung voices can be heard by a group of computers, allowing them to respond together or individually. Conversations can follow different hypertextual paths depending on what is heard by which computer. As a side effect the fact of using singing voices as triggers obviously questions, modifies, or inspires any other melodic content. The computers also hear tones played over loud speaker monitors, (currently used to get all the computers synchronised for a new scene).

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G.H. Hovagimyan is a multimedia and internet artist. His weekly "radio show" Art Dirt is audio/video streamed and can be accessed world wide via the internet <<http://www.channelp.com>>. He is one of the core artists of artnetweb, a leading website in New York. He is a professor of art in the computer arts department at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. For the 1997-98 academic year he was a visiting artist/ professor at; Cornell College, Iowa, University of Tennessee (Knoxville), University of Iowa (Intermedia Department) and the Ecole D'art D'aix-en-Provence.

Peter Sinclair is a multi-media artist whose many works explore the areas of pop music, mechanical art, installation art, performance art and digital technology. He was born in England but lives and works in France. Recently he has been visiting the US and presenting original "sound installation/ sculpture/ performance works at New York City's Lincoln Center and San Francisco's Exploratorium. Sinclair is a 1997 "Villa Medecis Hors Les Murs" Laureat. He is a professor of art at the Ecole D'art D'aix-en-Provence.

Starting in 1996 Sinclair and Hovagimyan began to exchange ideas and worked together in various new media and internet formats. During a visit to New York Sinclair participated in a Cu See Me video interface with Art Dirt and the ISEA in Rotterdam. Subsequently Hovagimyan and Sinclair organized a remote performance interface from Aix-en-Provence to the List Center for the Visual Arts at MIT. This was part of artnetweb's PORT-MIT exhibition. Recently Sinclair and Hovagimyan have been working together producing "Machined Music." This was done with Hovagimyan writing lyrics and having a computer sing them while Sinclair recorded sound samples and mixed the various sound files down to a song format. From this collaboration grew the idea of creating a soap opera for laptop computers.

programming by Laurent Potier

Sponsored by the GMEM (Groupe Musiques Experimentales du Marseille)
and The Ecole D'art D'Aix-en-Provence

Premiere performance April 5th, 1998 at the Musée D'art Contemporain,
Marseille, France

with

Guillaume Blanchard, Renaud Courvoisier, Beatriz da Costa, Yann Gourm, Guillaume Stagnard, Elise Touanen.

Unlike traditional performance art, theater, mime, puppetry etc., A Soa(p Op)era for Laptops is a product of computer driven fluid networked formative procedure. This arises from the nature of working with computers in a non-hierarchical format, so that the programming informs the movement informs the voices which in turn inspires the immersive sound and animation environments. Or if one chooses the sound dictates the voices which drive the programming which necessitates certain movement for the vehicles to interact. Or the animation cues the audience to the mise-en-scene being sung/ talked by the synth-voices while the human operators telematically project the implied movements sometimes aping human gestures, at other times positioning themselves at the ready for a sound cue.

The work is an ongoing discourse concerning late 20th century communication and mass media ideas. It is a work about the global communication environment. This environment created by movies, advertising and pop culture is trans-national. A Soa(p Op)era for Laptops recognizes this synthetic new world inspiring its thematic metaphors. Indeed networked computer environments and programming language along with the internet are collapsing distance and creating synthetic cultures that are no longer nation centric but exist in "cyberspace". In this new networked infrastructure, the scene within a scene of theater becomes a social space driven by program function, pop language and situational "spectacle" telematically presented through singing laptop synthespians.

Act I: scene 2

Fred wakes up, takes a shower and sings in the shower. Princess enters and talks to him in the shower, he stops singing and responds, "what she says, never mind" he returns to singing. The sequence uses Max to interrupt singing, leaves a distance then returns to singing.
- movement Fred advances to front stage and begins as if showering, Princess follows and talks.

programming by Laurent Pottier

Sponsored by the GMEM (Groupe Musicale Experimentale du Marseille)
and The Ecole D'art D'Aix-en-Provence

Premiere performance April 9th, 1998 at the Musee D'art Contemporain,
Marseille, France

with:

Guillame Blanchard, Renaud Courvoisier, Beatriz da Costa, Yann Goulm, Guillame Stagnaro, Elise Touanen.

Act I: scene 3

Ralph drives to work and sings a song while watching a story (sound environment traffic, car screen, traffic animation)

- movement center stage - Ralph into microphone

Act I: scene 4

Ralph arrives at the office, the secretary greets him, he responds to sound cues with various answers (sound environment: office machines, paper printer, desks, machines etc.)

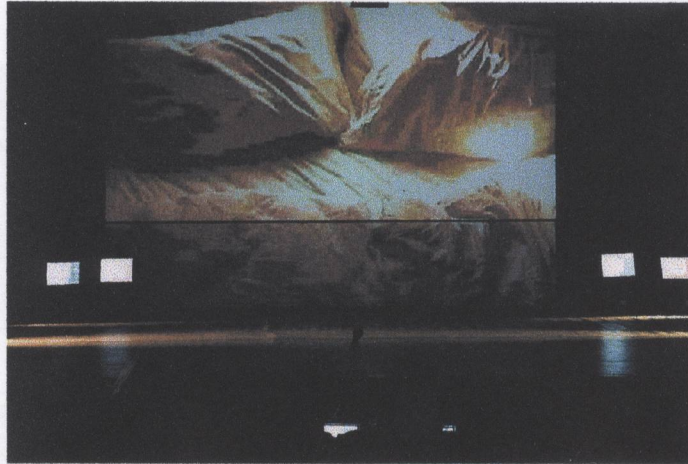
- movement Princess stationary center stage, Ralph circles as if passing

Scenario

Act I: scene 1

Ralph and Kathy are asleep stage right (sound environment: roosters crow, alarm clocks ring, rear screen, sunrise)

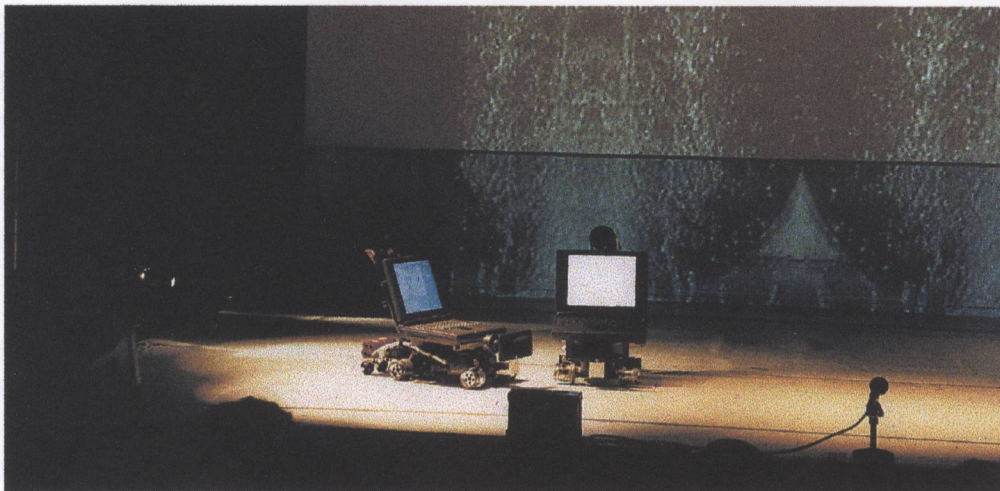
Ralph stirs and begins to move. He starts doing his exercises, counting, "stretch one two, bend one two"... Kathy stirs and reminds him he has to go shopping for the big dinner party. This sequence uses the Max program to interrupt Ralph's speaking, he responds to Kathy then returns to his counting. - movement back and forth for Ralph as if exercising, Kathy follows later and stops to talk.



Act I: scene 2

Fred wakes up, takes a shower and sings in the shower, Princess stirs and talk to him in the shower, he stops singing and responds, "what" she says, "never mind" he returns to singing. The sequence uses Max to interrupt singing, cause a response then return to singing.

- movement Fred advances to front stage and twitches as if showering, Princess follows and talks.



Act I: scene 3

Ralph drives to work and sings a song while relating a story (sound environment traffic, rear screen, traffic animation)

- movement center stage. Sings into microphone.

Act I: scene 4

Ralph arrives at the office, his secretary briefs him, he responds to sound cues with various answers. (sound environment; office machines. Rear screen, desks, machines etc..)

- movement Princess stationary center stage Ralph circles as if pacing

Act I: scene 5

Fred arrives at office, other three characters align in a diagonal, Fred approaches each one and speech/response occurs.

Act I: Scene 6

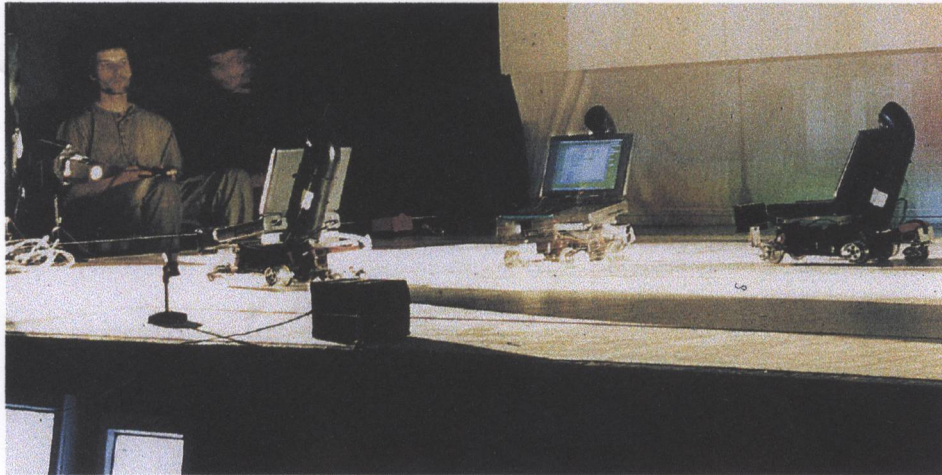
All characters move in random patterns. Scene is musical interlude with singing/ rapping Communicatin' Frenzy.

Act I: Scene 7

Fred goes to lunch at Macdonald's (sound environment animals squeeling, visuals Macdonald emblem, hamburger being constructed)

Fred sings Old Mac Donald had a farm... in Microphone center front.

- movement three characters circle behind playing follow the leader.



Act II: scene 1

Ralph goes to super market. (sound environment cash register sounds, visuals of market aisles, hanging meats etc...) Ralph follows Princess around stage slowly.

Act II: scene 2

Dinner Party-

Ralph and Kathy stage right - Fred and Princess move to center on diagonal (sound environment various doorbells, visuals are of dinner table settings and elegant food)

movement is to microphone where group arranges in semi circle to sing a song together after group moves to center stage perpendicular to audience as if sitting across from each other at a table.

Dinner conversation ensues with various interruptions and sound cues.

Act II: scene 3

Scat Car Cat - (sound is of seagulls beach sounds motorcycles, visuals beach, red cars)

Fred chases Princess around stage very fast.

Act II scene 4

Ralph and Kathy make love (sound is romantic music, visual is pulsing cartoon heart)

movement is rhythmic voices onomatopoeisms.

Act II scene 5

The computers regain their original positions and snore while the lights fade.

