

Western Front Society  
Vancouver, BC

## Remix and Feedback: A Roundtable Discussion on January 9, 2004

by Adrienne Lai

*Remix and Feedback*, a roundtable discussion that took place January 10, 2004 at the Emily Carr Institute, focussed on the concept of the remix and its current impact on art, music, and popular culture. Moderated by Dr. Randy Lee Cutler, the discussion featured local artist/musician Brady Cranfield, Los Angeles-based duo Slanguage (Juan Capistran and Mario Ybarra Jr.) and New York-based artist/writer/musician Paul D. Miller (AKA DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid). Each speaker gave a brief introductory presentation on his work, and the remix's characteristic multiplicity and simultaneity was evident in the interdisciplinary nature of the participants' practices. The range of disciplines and influences present included: music (rock and roll, electronica, hip hop, DJing), art (sound, performance, public intervention, installation, poster/graphics, architectural proposals), curation (gallery-based graffiti survey show, experimental music festival), and theory/writing. The ensuing discussion was prompted by audience questions, which seemed to be influenced by concerns based more in the current economic, material and socio-political situation than in the abstract theoretical ether.

Although the remix was not explicitly defined or characterized by the panellists, Miller described it as "the familiar made unfamiliar", citing Marcel Duchamp and John Cage as examples of this ethos. Miller exulted in the possibilities offered by the remix, particularly in its use as a tool against cultural passivity: via the mix, individuals can re-interpret and re-envision cultural information, instead of simply absorbing it. Cranfield took a more cautious view, noting that cultural information doesn't always need to be unified under a remix – difference and separation are also valuable. It was also noted that the remix, as a form that emphasizes the reuse and recycling of cultural elements, should not be embraced at the cost of continuing attempts to generate entirely new cultural models.

Remix culture has been made possible by developments in digital technology, an increasing access to cultural products in forms that are easily malleable through available software. This ubiquity has various implications; first, because of the sheer amount of information delivered daily, culture and media become things in which we are immersed, like fish in the ocean. The remix is a system through which people with access to technology can begin to sift through this mass of information, and to customize it in order to better serve their specific needs and agendas. Here, DJing is likened to a kind of 21<sup>st</sup> Century folk art. Second, the availability of the tools of production and distribution (via internet and peer-to-peer file sharing) has empowered individual cultural producers, as exemplified in the proliferation of independent record labels. This has had a significant impact on the way the music industry works, and the future repercussions will likely be huge. Finally, it should be noted that information's mobility and malleability can just as

easily be used to further corporate or government agendas: for example, Fox News can make its own “remix” of the War in Iraq to suit its own political or corporate motivations.

The tone of the discussion alternated between a liberal utopian optimism and a more cautious post 9/11 cynicism, with particular concern directed towards the connections between increased government control (especially in the U.S.) and corporate interests. These concerns manifested themselves in questions about copyright, ownership, and control of cultural information by big businesses and their legal departments. The whole concept of ownership becomes problematized, as one audience member noted: in DJ Spooky’s remix of a Moby song that samples Alan Lomax’s recording of a slave singing, who claims creative ownership? Is it “owned” by every person along the line who has touched it in some way? It was suggested that the well-entrenched notions of ownership and copyright may have to be rethought, at least among individual cultural producers, where a peer-to-peer culture of sharing and exchange may be proposed instead. However, in terms of large-scale commercial products such as Top 40 pop music, the trope of ownership will remain central, as long as financial profit is the main goal.

This contrast in scale echoes the tensions between the themes of the local/global and individual/collective, which resurfaced over the course of the discussion. While Miller celebrated the ocean of information and the borderless exchange of culture as a kind of global unconsciousness, Capistran and Ybarra spoke from their locally-situated, community-based experiences in Los Angeles. The notion of embodiment figured prominently in this negotiation between the individual self and the larger collectives of culture and identity. Although we live in a technological situation where an artist can be simultaneously engaging in diverse activities all over the globe, the common denominator that holds all of these practices together is the person, the body. Ybarra spoke to this idea from the position of a post-identity politics artist of colour, considering himself as the embodiment of remix: a selection and combination of cultural information at a particular moment, always subject to change. This idea of self as embodied remix offers many possibilities as a model for anti-essentialist conceptualizations of identity.

Many of the issues popular in cultural debates of the late 1980s and early 1990s were mostly absent from the discussion. For example, no one in the audience commented on the fact that except for the moderator, all the speakers were men; nor did anyone directly address the relative absence of women in hip hop and DJ culture. Furthermore, while the topic of cultural appropriation – extremely pertinent to a discussion of remix culture - was broached, it did not seem to be as vexing and incendiary a problem as it was ten years ago. While Capistran noted the importance of knowledge, research, and respect with regard to the sources being appropriated, Miller espoused a more *laissez faire* approach, noting that irreverence towards culture is often the best weapon against stasis and totalitarianism.

Overall, it seemed that a celebration of the remix as a postmodern model for the free creation of meaning was tempered by an awareness of possible limitations on creative freedom posed by political and corporate interests. However, despite this cautionary tone, the remix was acknowledged as a useful tool, one that can be used productively as a means of resistance to dominant narratives, a way of interrogating history and owning memory. The difficulty ahead will lie in the negotiation of issues of ownership and copyright, and whether it will be possible to

formulate a system appropriate to both commercially-driven corporate institutions and creatively and intellectually-driven independent cultural producers.