Design Research and the Automatic
by Brent “Sparky” Barson

I can tell you right now that this paper doesn’t need to be two paragraphs long. It is obvious to me that the secret hidden connection between the designers and artists who have talked to us this term in Digital Dialogues is this: their cars. I bet every one of these people drives an automatic. (Except DJ Spooky, who doesn’t have a car—and if he did, it would be some amalgamation of car scraps gathered from a junkyard, one part not matching the other, welded together to form a bizzare techno-jalopy performance art piece with an automatic transmission.) You thought you’d fool us all, didn’t you Peter? Well I’m too quick to be tricked, yo.

What’s that? I’m on crack? Well, I guess I’ll go back to the topic at hand. I want to talk about what DJ Spooky does, from a musician’s standpoint, and also what Miltos Manetas does, from a trickster/jokester standpoint. First off, I’d like to say that my ideal job would be to combine what those two gentlemen do, and maybe throw in a little experimental gerbil comedy for variation. Gerbil comedy, of course, has nothing to do with Richard Gere, and everything to do with rodent actors, performing comedy roles (I would be the director, of course.) DJ Spooky is a brilliant DJ, but a lot of people might not realize that at first glance. For example, his performance on Feb. 25th at Art Center involved him scratching in and out of time to a Quicktime movie of jazz musicians. An electronic/dance music lover might say “Yeah, he can scratch, but you can’t dance to that cacophonous mess,” and maybe a traditional orchestral musician might say, “That’s not really music, and besides, he’s just pushing buttons, the machines are doing all the work.” Still another skeptic might say, “Anyone could do that, if you put a couple turntables and a laptop with a quicktime movie in front of me.” But the point is, no one really does, except for DJ Spooky. And the other point is, he is purposefully trying to break down borders between musical genres, by creating this new sound, which is different at every live performance. Maybe people thought it too simple of an idea to scratch live music along with pre-made video and sound. In breaking down these borders, he is creating a new form of music, in using other people’s sounds as his own. Those buttons he is pushing only perform their work after he pushes them, which is at the exact right time, in his head. (No one would tell a cellist that he or she is not really playing the music, and that the cello is the thing actually producing the sound.) DJ Spooky probably spends just as much time selecting the music he blends together, figuring out what form it’s going to take, and in the end he “practices” just as much as a traditional musician. He does as much “research” in selecting the genres of vinyl to play and in how to mix them, as an orchestral conductor does in arranging his music.

I was having a hard time figuring out exactly what Miltos Manetas did, before we decided in class that he was a “trickster” more than anything else. Well, an artist backed up by a lot of tricks. He is just as eclectic in his collections of visuals and animations and tricks in the art world, as DJ Spooky is at mixing his music. If I had not seen his actual paintings/digital prints when we went to the Electronic Orphanage, I might have
thought he had little talent of his own, and just took the good work of others and displayed it. Now I realize that even if he didn’t have any work of his own (I really liked his prints, by the way,) he still would be a genius for thinking of the tricks he does (the Whitney Biennial Hijacking comes immediately to mind.) It seems as though he has sized up the fine art establishment (at least the Whitney Biennial part of the art world,) and figured out ways to turn it upside down. Being part of that very art world, this is intriguing to me that he would be so adventurous in making a mockery of it. The fact that a velvet rope means “Stay out” in some places, doesn’t mean that when ever you see a velvet rope, you should stay out. Miltos’ manipulations of people’s established social boundaries (i.e.-his trick of placing the velvet rope in front of a building to see how many stay out) is one of the most engaging forms of “art,” if you ask me.** I agree with his methods 100%. The fact that you can’t go into the Electronic Orphanage on certain days to see the projections is brilliant as well. Why do you really need to be inside to look at a huge screen that is easily visible from outside the glass? This simple act makes the entire space the work of art, not just the projections being shown on the screen. It also makes the presentation seem more “automatic,” just being an onlooker, and having no control over it; not even being able to walk in front of the screen and cast your shadow.

Dj Spooky and Miltos Manetas may have different methods and techniques, but the ways in which their work makes people think about the definitions of art and music are the same. They are both blending ideas and genres and creating new genres at the same time. At the risk of writing a cheesy last sentence which attempts to wrap this thought paper up, I want to say that boldly using the “automatic,” in technology and art, is the only way to innovate. I respect these two artists for being able to survive doing the work they do, even if they are not yet respected by everyone.

* May not be true in all areas. May contain traces of soybean and/or unresearched opinions. Offer void where prohibited.

** What’s that? You didn't ask me? Well, it's my paper, so BACK OFF!