THE WIRED PROFESSOR

A GUIDE TO INCORPORATING THE WORLD WIDE WEB IN COLLEGE INSTRUCTION

ANNE B. KEATING
WITH JOSEPH HARGITAI

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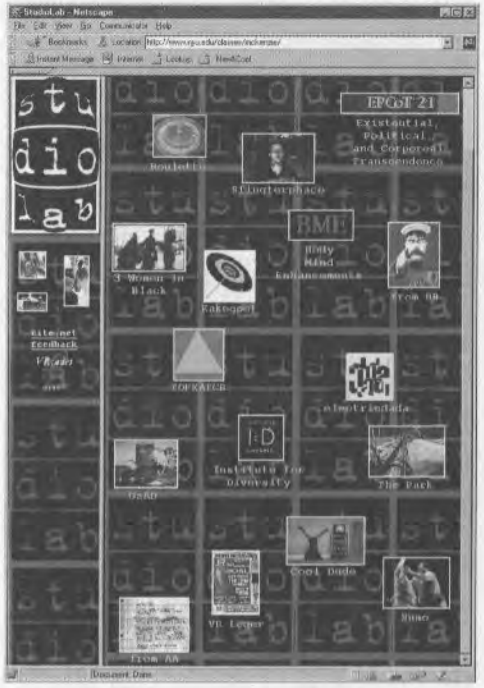


Figure 3.16. StudioLab: thought, experiments, digital performance workshop, by Professor Jon McKenzie, at *http://www.nyu.edu/classes/mckenzie/*.

Jon McKenzie is an adjunct professor in the Department of Performance Studies at NYU. In 1996, he decided to tackle the question: "How does an artist perform technologically?" With this question in mind he taught "Electronic Performance" as a graduate course in the summer of 1996 and then as an undergraduate workshop in the fall. He explains that "the focus of both workshops was to explore electronic performance as the cross of cultural performance (such as theater, ritual, and performance art) and technological performance (ranging from clocks and answering machines to computers and the Internet)."[61] For this course, McKenzie created "StudioLab," a sophisticated Web site that became a stage for the workshops.

> As the name suggests, StudioLab takes place in the environments of performance studio and computer lab. Its workshops explore connections between theory, performance, and new media through the production of actual and virtual events. These events are generated by individual and collective projects that investigate specific cultural problems, such as the impact of technology on everyday life and the role of the humanities in inventing new forms of sociotechnical interactivity. . . . Its productions include electronic theory, low-tech theater, performance art, and environmental and Web projects.[62]

We asked McKenzie how he came up with the idea of using the Web as a stage. He explained that both humans and technologies perform: "interfaces are thus always joint performances."[63] McKenzie believed that it was critically important for his drama students to experience and experiment with new media. He also admits that he was drawn to the Web because of his background in fine arts and cultural theory.

> One project I use, "Interface in Everyday Life," combines performance art and Donald Norman's work on interface design. Students pick a common interface, explore the activities its design elicits, and create a live performance from this exploration. They then try to translate the performance back into a Web interface. Another project is a transformation of Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theater,* which develops a theory of human-computer interaction using Aristotle's *Poetics.* Students create actual and virtual events by substituting another performance form for Greek tragedy: Kabuki, solo performance, Dada, Sumo, as well as the theater of Brecht, Artaud, Schechner, and LeCompte. In all cases, I give students lots of guidance and structure early on—and then try to get out of the way. Some experiments work, some don't, but that's what makes them experiments.[64]

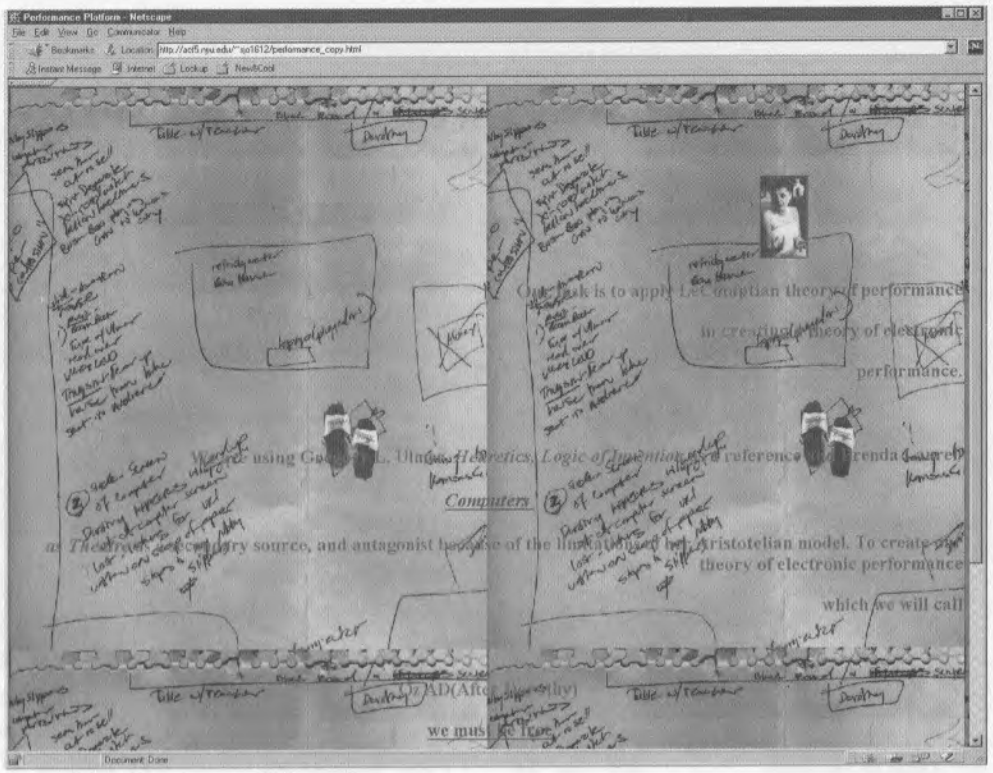


Figure 3.17. StudioLab student work: *Homeless Home*, at *http://acf5.nyu.edu/~sjo1612/performance_copy.html*. Courtesy of Abigail S. Freeman and Stacey J. Oropello.

We asked McKenzie his opinion about the validity of collaborative student Web projects. He explained that theater has traditionally been a collaborative activity:

> If dramatic writing has traditionally been a solitary activity, producing theater has always been collaborative: actors, costume and set designers, technical crews, etc. It's this collaborative dimension that makes theater so applicable to creating new media, which requires integrating so many different skills and media. Again, not all collaborations work, but, then again, neither do all individual works. I think that the model of individual genius that has dominated modern aesthetics is giving way to collaborative modes of creativity. For me, *all* creativity is social and recombinant.[65]

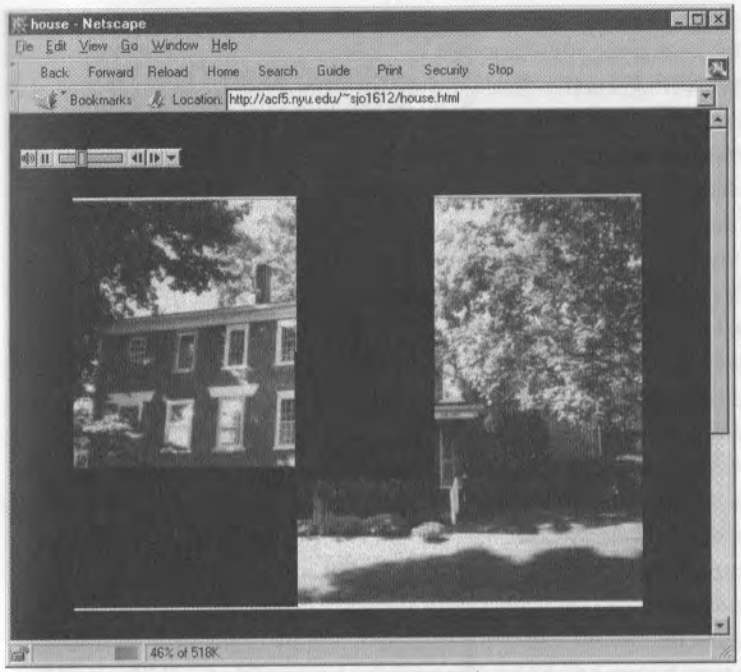
Student participation is high in McKenzie's classes, and he has created a framework that permits students to add their own work. Like Adelman, McKenzie has organized his students into clearly structured Web project groups. He explains the role of the groups and his role as a teacher:

> StudioLab is designed to let students experiment: but it's not a free-for-all, it has a dynamic and interlaced structure. Students work in both performance studio and computer lab, moving from one to the other. In the collaborative projects, they work as "bands" in the studio, working on their performances and discussing the issues raised by the class. Each band is composed of a Hypertextualist, a Multimedium, and a Photoshopper, and these form "guilds" for working in the computer lab. It's like a rock band: the drummers get together, the bass players, the lead guitars, and they share techniques, so when they get back with their bands, they jam better. My function is like a producer: I give them advice about how to mix their tracks. Interlacing the bands and guilds was an important discovery for me, for it took the collaboration to a higher level.[66]

We asked McKenzie to talk about the process of updating and maintaining a large Web site like StudioLab. He joked that "Maintaining a Web site is artificial life!" He explains:

> It's a joke that makes sense on at least two levels. First, anyone who builds and maintains a site knows that it takes some effort and if you want it to be really interesting, it takes a lot of effort, so much that it can take over your life for a while. Second, the joke suggests Manuel De Landa's notion of inorganic life, which teaches us something important about human-computer interfaces, namely, that there are feedback loops and machinic processes everywhere, operating in all mediums—organic and inorganic—and doing so at very different scales and temporalities. Machinic processes are more than tools, more than mediums even: at a general level, they make up everything. Computers may make this generalized "artifice" more visible than it's been for a long time, at least in the West. Specific technologies such as tools, the alphabet, and spoken language have been feeding back on humans for millenia: just look at our thumbs and vocal cords![67]

I was also a member of this first wave of instructors who walked into the Innovation Center. Some, like Julia Keefer, taught in the same program as I did. Joseph introduced



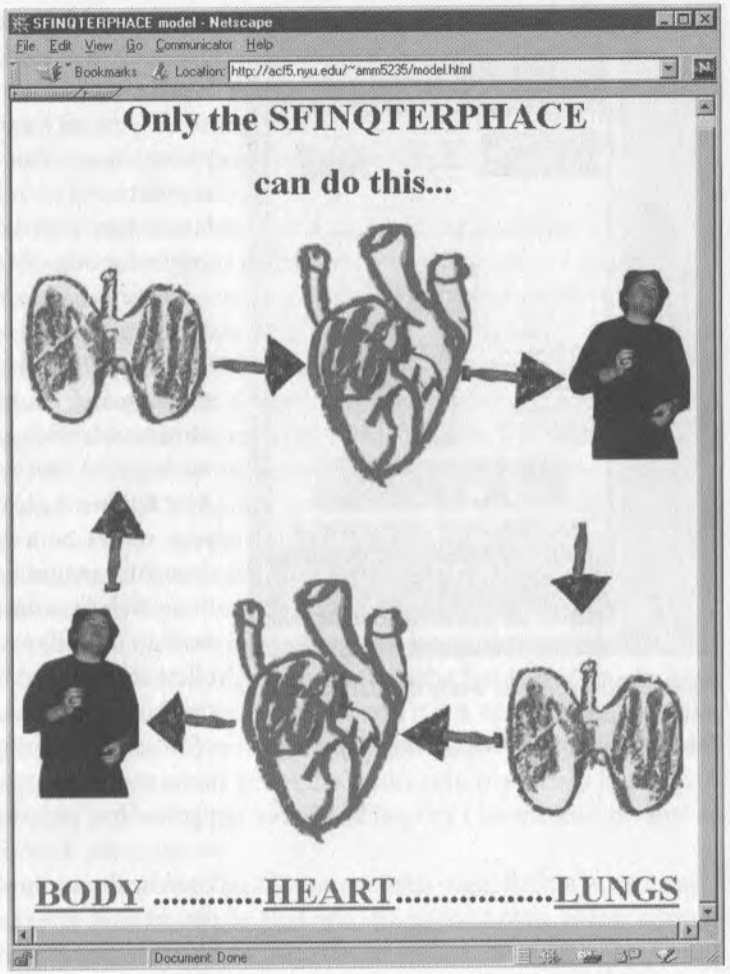


Figure 3.18. *(above)* StudioLab student work: *Homeless Home*, a clever visual pun using a GIF animation to "deconstruct" a middle-class home. Courtesy of Abigail S. Freeman and Stacey J. Oropello.
Figure 3.19. *(right)* StudioLab student work: *Sfinqterphace* by the "heart people," who argue in their manifesto: "much too long audiences of western theatre have sat quietly in the dark so as not to disturb the performance." Courtesy of Marc Schmittroth, Anney Fresh and Bobbie G. Gossage.