



At left, Hartt graduate Bill Solomon M'07 (left) plays percussion as Hartt graduate Lief Ellis '07 uses a laptop to produce the images and additional sounds in the mixed-media piece *Triple Music* in a performance at the Hartford Art School (HAS). Above, HAS students edit the visuals as the piece is streamed live on the Internet.

Cyber Art

BY KAREN HUNTER

HAS
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Collaboration is most often a means to an end, but at the University's visual and performing arts schools, interdisciplinary collaboration itself is the art.

Gene Gort, associate professor of media arts at the Hartford Art School, and Ken Steen, associate professor of composition and theory at The Hartt School, have taken their students out of the comfort zone of traditional studios and solitary work. Instead, the students collaborate in a cyber studio, where they use sound and images contributed anonymously to produce inspired, if not surprising, results.

"Working with interdisciplinary groups was confusing at first," admits Jessica Hu, a senior majoring in media arts at the art school. "I didn't fully understand [before] how collaboration involves a relinquishing of control and complete openness to change and improvisation."

The seed for Gort and Steen's collaborative approach to teaching was planted while they were fellows at The MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, N.H., in 2006. Working on a "parallel media" piece (*Reliquary of Labor*) commissioned to celebrate the expansion of the New Britain (Conn.) Museum of American Art, they built a website (reliquaryoflabor.net) that contained all of their work—bits that had been worked and reworked, sketches, arrangements, ideas, successes and failures—with the intent of making the creative process transparent to anyone interested.

"That became our teaching model," Gort says. Steen and Gort introduced the process to their students in the 2007 spring semester, establishing a website, the New Media Collaborative, that allowed their classes to share found and created sound, video, and still images.

Kaeza Fearn, a master's student in composition at Hartt who took Steen's Music Technology II class in the spring of 2008, appreciated the sense of community the first projects built—anonymous or not.

"It was interesting to see and use what students from another class created," Fearn says. "The fact that the pieces belonged to art school students connected us all together across the campus lawn—a truly hip concept. What is more, the website connecting us all . . . is fascinating in its own right."

Certainly, Gort and Steen are pleased with the reception their approach to collaborative art has received. As Gort says, "What I find most interesting about the collaboration effort is that students respond to each other's work and not to personalities. . . . Part of what we wanted to do was jump over the ego and really look at the artistic and creative sensibilities."

Steen assigns two New Media Collaborative projects a semester to students in his Music Technology II and Intro to Computer Music classes. Their works and those of students in Gort's Sound, Image, Text class are available for anyone to see, hear, and participate in at uhavax.hartford.edu/nmc.

"We use the website more casually now in terms of classes. We don't do the collaborations in a strict, in-class curriculum form," Gort says.

Both professors agree that there are obstacles to collaborative teaching inherent at any university. "We are trying to find a way to bring the schools together despite the hurdles of everyday life at the University," Steen says. "There are many [considerations]—meeting times, grading, class space—just in the way a university is set up. Those are the boundaries we are trying to break through. What the Web has allowed us to do is find a meeting place."

Steen and Gort are interested in connecting other disciplines to the New Media Collaborative—writing, engineering, and biology, for instance.

"My job, like all teaching," Gort says, "is to open our students to the possibilities. They take it from there." ■