The Overview

Organum is a collaborative art project, which explores the human voice through sound, image and technology. Organum Playtest (2005), a video game in which gamers navigate through a model of the human voice box using their own voices as game controls is the centerpiece of the week-long Organum installation, which includes an earlier Organum story, a movie, and a series of recent illustrations etched in glass and in mirrors.

The Story

The Organum story (Niemeyer, 2002) is a fable about human organs that have become creatures of their own. The main characters are voice boxes with tattooed lungs and three legs. They live in the Valley of Distributed Organs, where they sing to the brain creatures for new ideas and sing to the stomach creatures for food. But there is a drought in the valley, and they are forced to change their ways and explore beyond the boundaries of their home.

The Film

The Organum film (Chafe, Niemeyer, Liu, Wang, 2003) is a 3D animated short about the lung creatures’ quest for water. Chris Chafe composed the songs that the creatures sing by translating the creatures’ motions into electronic sounds.

The Game

The Organum Playtest (Niemeyer, Perkel, Shaw, 2005) is a videogame in which groups of three gamers travel from the bottom of the lung to the tip of the tongue. Each gamer steers a different aspect of the motion (up & down, left & right, and forward) by singing. The goal of the game is to explore all organs and to destroy pathogens on the way.
Performance: The Human Voice Explored

Three professional singers, the Tiwa singer Seth Augustus, the classically trained Aurora Josephson and the beatboxer Kid Beyond will take the Organum Playtest to performative extremes. Although their voices are trained differently, they share the common goal of exploring all levels of Organum, and of harmonizing across the boundaries of musical genres.

8:00 PM to about 9:30 PM: The Human Voice Explored (Admission 8.00)

Talks: Organum Playtest

Organum was created by a team of artists including Greg Niemeyer, composer Chris Chafe, animators Lorenzo Wang and Christine Liu, programmers Ryan Shaw and Dan Perkel, and game designer Jane McGonigal. During the Brown Bag Lunch talks, Organum participants will discuss their practices and their collaborative methods.

12:00 to 12:45 PM: Greg Niemeyer: A Human Voice

Niemeyer, a member of the Art Faculty and the Center for New Media at UC Berkeley, explains why he switched his practice from photography to new media and interactivity. He addresses the interaction of the extremely intimate and the extremely public in the human voice and the connections between the different media used in the Organum project.

1:00 to 1:45 PM: Chris Chafe: When You Hear a Tree Fall...

Chafe, Director of the Stanford University CCRMA (Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics) introduces basic ideas in computer music, discusses the anatomy of the voice box, and presents the design and functionality of the voice synthesis software he used to create the film score for Organum and for a recent composition entitled “rebar”.

2:00 to 2:45 PM: Ryan Shaw and Dan Perkel: Playtest Programming

Perkel and Shaw, both Masters Students in the UC Berkeley School of Information Management Systems, discuss the collaboration strategies they used to unite the creative and technical efforts for Organum Playtest.

3:00 to 3:45 PM: Jane McGonigal: The Extroverted Play Experience

McGonigal, a game designer and a Ph.D. candidate in Performance Studies at UC Berkeley, describes the elements of game analysis and defines the terms “extroverted play” and its crucial role in popularizing novel game forms including DDR, Eyetoy and Alternate Reality Games.

6:00 to 8:00 PM: Reception, Admission Free, No Host Bar

What does Organum mean?

In Latin “organum” means both tool and organ. Organum was coined as a musical term in the 15th century when clerical composers devised a method for composing choral arrangements with multiple distinct, but harmonizing voices. In this project, Organum is a mood, where several voices cooperate without sounding the same.

Can one buy Organum?

Organum is an Open Source art project. Copies of all electronic materials are available freely by download from http://art.berkeley.edu/organum. The glass and mirror etchings in an edition of 12 are available individually for $250.00 per glass and $500.00 per mirror. The proceeds cover the production cost.