A Spooky Sampling of New Media: Paul Miller Speaks at SOA

By Colin Morris

Even in a classroom situation, it is immediately clear that Paul Miller is a DJ. His multimedia presentations are as much a performance as a lecture. Spinning back and forth between ideas and narratives with a colorful barrage of sight and sound, Miller mixes historical tidbits with large conceptual models using sound bites, critical jargon and youth vernacular. Miller’s alternate identity—DJ Speaker Kid, the acclaimed turntable whiz kid, the acclaimed turntable whiz and new media artist—looms large.

So when Mark Tribe, director of arts and technology at SOA’s Digital Media Center, organized the Art and Technology Lecture Series, Miller was an astute choice. In a packed Altschul Auditorium on March 24, Columbia students got to see a presentation on technology, and the arts and technology at SOA’s Digital Media Center, organized by Mark Tribe, director of arts and technology at SOA.

Miller’s work is all about connectivity. His art and music are a funky blend of different cultures, and he gets his message across through an array of media, including albums, the Internet, art galleries, magazines—even stickers. As an artist, Miller identifies patterns and idiosyncrasies spawned by mass production and the information age. Whether cutting and scratching vinyl records or pixilated image fragments, Miller creates inclusive collages that borrow from a huge array of sources, which he calls remixes. These remixes are built from an elaborate layering of the basic element of borrowing: the sample.

“DJ culture’s been one of the clichés for people to translate different rhythm structures and syntaxes to their own local and personal style by tailoring and taking from fragments of various archives,” Miller explained. “My artwork is always playing with patterns of culture, patterns of memory and how these patterns can be applied to different cultures. The whole stem is about collecting and being able to translate across mediums. That’s where the spooky middle ground is.”

Having grown up in Washington D.C., and then going to school in Maine, Miller said, he developed an interest in the dichotomy between what’s perceived as high and low culture. “As an undergrad at Bowdoin, I found a cognitive disconnect whenever trying to map metaphors from one medium to another.” When a professor would describe Socrates’ “street” speeches, Miller said that he would interject “that sounds like Chuck D to me,” referring to the rapper in the seminal hip-hop group Public Enemy. The use of a public forum to convey ideas, whether by a Greek philosopher or an innovative emcee, spoke volumes to Miller, who considers the Internet to be the new “street.”

Though Miller works at the forefront of the contemporary arts, he never forgets his history. During his talk Miller described how the industrial revolution has led to a democratization of art through a culture of copying and mass communication. He described the influential role of Alex Steinweiss, who in the 1920s invented the concept of the record sleeve and album art. “The idea of the record cover sleeve is revolutionary since it eliminates the original with multiple production,” Miller said. “The whole idea of ‘original’ is under critique, under interrogation. Graphic design and the issues of the remix are still with us in a way that artists in the 1920s would find very familiar.”

To further the tradition of borrowing Miller offers up his own work for the public to remix. On his Web site, www.djpokey.com, users can download high-quality versions of his work and augment them however they like, he explained. The same goes for his visual artwork.

In an interview, Mark Tribe put Miller’s art into an historical perspective: “DJ culture is open source culture—the culture of sharing, of appropriation, of collage, of the found object. It’s an approach to art-making that goes all the way back to Duchamp and the readymade. It’s much of 20th-century art, DJ culture leaves behind the cult of originality and authenticity, replacing it with a different aesthetic, what one might call the aesthetic of the remix.” “The purpose of this lecture series is to develop a critical understanding of art and technology as an interdisciplinary field with tremendous importance and relevance not only to more traditional domains of artistic practice, but also to science, engineering and the humanities,” Tribe explained. “These artists neither fear new technologies nor fetishize them. On the contrary, they see new technologies—from robots to video games—as opportunities to explore (sometimes critically, sometimes playfully) the relationship between technology and culture.”

The Art and Technology Lecture Series will conclude with a lecture by Ricardo Domenech on May 12, in the Lifetime Screening Room (311 Dodge Hall).

Columbia Community Outreach Sets Day of Service, April 24

Columbia Community Outreach’s annual Day of Service is a sure sign of spring, and this year it is set for April 24. Each year more than a thousand members of the Columbia community volunteer at some 40 sites citywide. CCO volunteers, who include Columbia students, faculty, administrators, and staff and alumni, work for such organizations as the Covenant House, A Better Place, Habitat for Humanity and the City of New York Parks and Recreation Department on landscaping, maintenance and clean-up projects.

This year’s Day of Service will begin at 9 a.m. with check-in and registration at Low Plaza. The opening ceremony is set for 10 a.m., when University President Lee C. Bollinger and Rep. Charles Rangel are scheduled to speak. Volunteers will then leave for their projects at 11 a.m. and return to campus for food and celebration by 5 p.m.

Founded in 1997, CCO performs valuable services around New York and helps to build mutually beneficial relationships between Columbia and the city at large. CCO also raises funds for other community service groups on campus and alerts students to the opportunities for long-term service at Columbia. Since its inception, CCO has raised more than $20,000 for Community Impact, Columbia’s umbrella service organization, and the Double Discovery Center, Columbia’s not-for-profit youth service agency for low-income, talented New York City high school students.

For more information, visit www.columbia.edu/cu/cco/outs/.