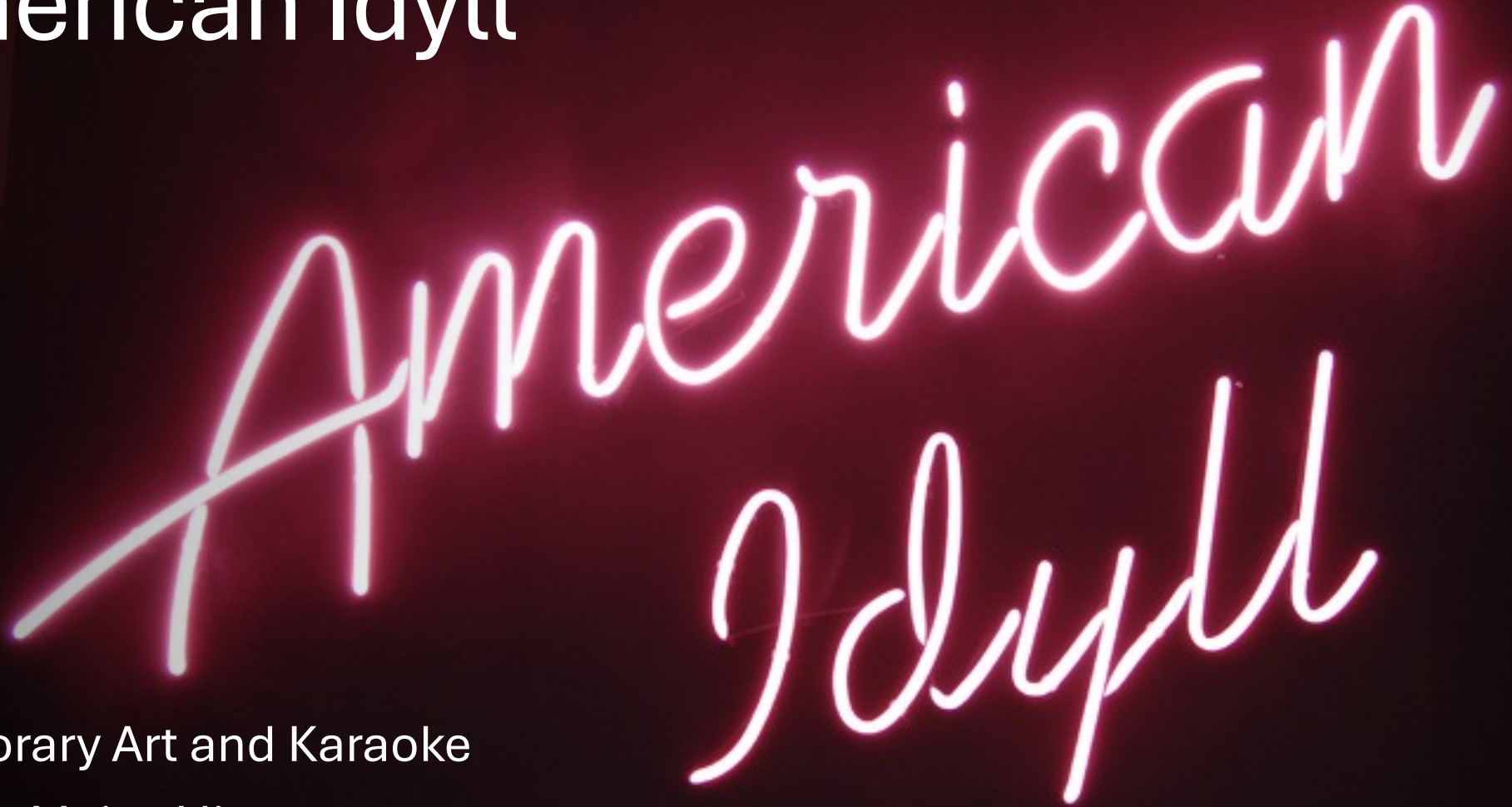


# American Idyll



American  
Idyll

Contemporary Art and Karaoke

Curated by Maiza Hixson

Contemporary Arts Center Cincinnati

2008

# Phil Collins

**PHIL COLLINS**  
***HE WHO LAUGHS LAST LAUGHS LONGEST***  
**2006**

**SINGLE-CHANNEL COLOR VIDEO  
INSTALLATION WITH SOUNDS,  
7 MINUTES 30 SECONDS  
EDITION OF 3; 2 ARTIST PROOFS  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TANYA  
BONAKDAR GALLERY, NEW YORK**

***HE WHO LAUGHS LAST LAUGHS LONGEST* CONSISTS OF A  
LAUGHING COMPETITION BETWEEN RANDOMLY-SELECTED  
PEOPLE VYING FOR A CASH PRIZE. MADE ON THE 80TH  
ANNIVERSARY OF JOHN LOGIE BAIRD'S INVENTION OF TELEVISION  
AND FILMED IN HIS BIRTHPLACE, HELENSBURGH, ARGYLL, SCOTLAND,  
COLLINS' WORK SUGGESTS THE UNDERSIDE OF REALITY TELEVISION.  
ALTHOUGH INITIALLY FUNNY, THE FORCED LAUGHTER ULTIMATELY  
ELICITS A FEELING OF APPREHENSION COMPOUNDED BY  
THE CLAUSTROPHOBIC INSTALLATION.**

# David Herbert



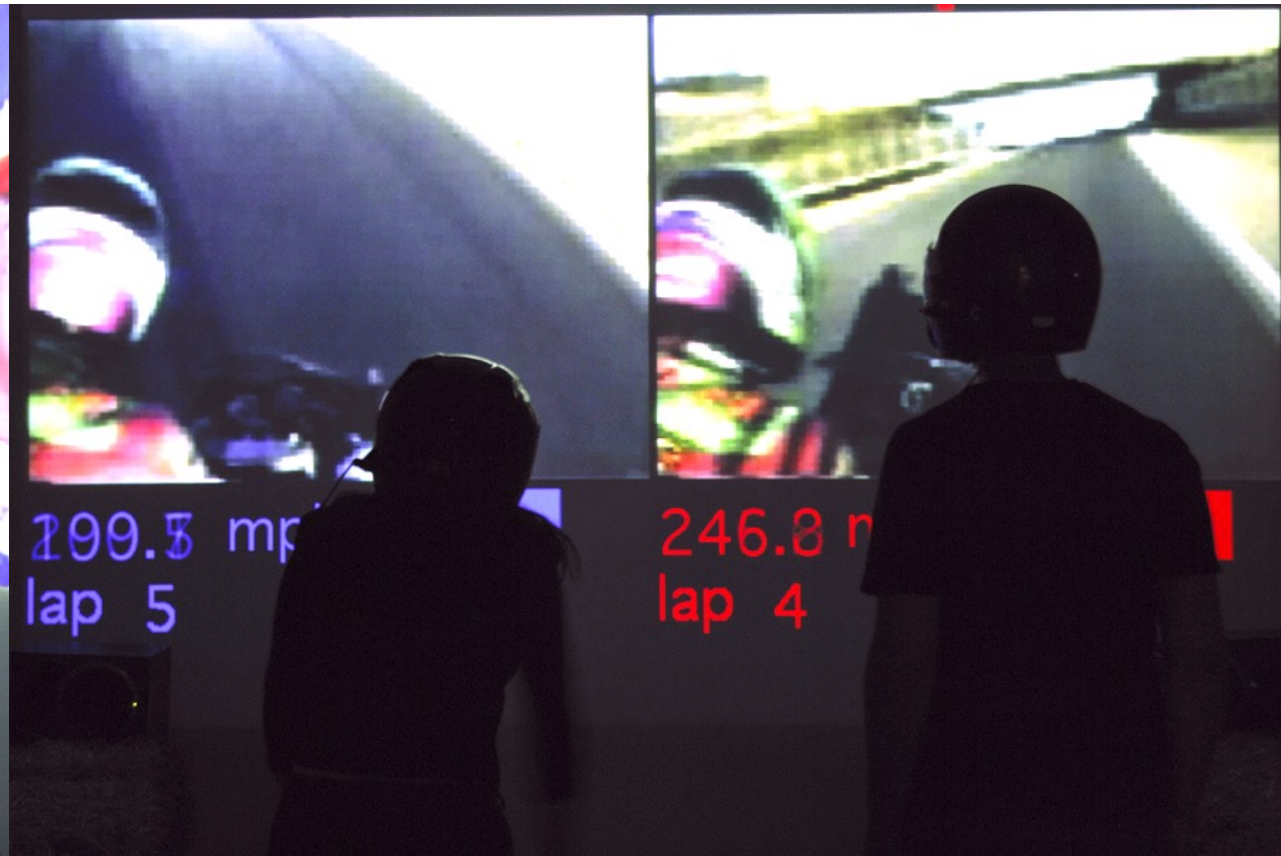
# Christian Jankowski



# Candice Breitz



# Mehdi Hercberg



# Mark Harris



# Joel Armor





Maiza Hixson-Curatorial Essay  
*American Idyll: Contemporary Art and Karaoke*

"Consider that karaoke....oddly mimics many of the characteristics of the contemporary art scene: both karaoke and contemporary art are symptoms of globalization; both are nomadic; both are fueled by our new experience economy; and both perfectly encapsulate the DIY [do it yourself] ethos that has become so pervasive in the last couple of decades."<sup>1</sup> -Helen Molesworth

The title of this exhibition, *American Idyll*, satirizes the televised singing competition and reality show "American Idol." Similar to the stereotypical "American Dream" that suggests anyone can be wealthy, the television show implies that anyone could be the next musical star. Exchanging the word "Idol," which connotes pop icon worship with "Idyll" referencing a serene experience, *American Idyll: Contemporary Art and Karaoke* creates a collective space for leisurely assembly rather than cutthroat competition. Surpassed only by the "Academy Awards" and the "Super Bowl," "American Idol" is the highest-rated TV program in the country. In contrast to the show's entertainment of audiences with the rare success of a select few singers and the failure of everyone else, *American Idyll* considers karaoke as an alternative to preconceived notions of talent that ultimately inhibit individual expression.

Helen Molesworth writes that "just as the rhetoric of democracy hangs around art's participatory modes, so too is karaoke 'democratic'--although the great equalizer here is that everyone is equally 'talentless,' which helps to generate the communal we're-all-in-this-together-and-anything-is-possible effect of karaoke bars."<sup>2</sup>

In 2004, Harvard University awarded the "Ig Nobel Peace Prize" to the inventor of the karaoke machine, Daisuke Inoue. Presented by actual Nobel Prize winners, the semi-precious award was given to Inoue for inventing the karaoke machine that provided "an entirely new way for people to learn to tolerate each other."<sup>3</sup>

*American Idyll* reflects the artistic interest in the reenactment of songs, music videos and reality shows. Raised with "MTV," "Wheel of Fortune" and "Star Search," karaoke and reenactment in general may serve as a means for some artists to process the impact of the shows they grew up on. Art writer and curator Tirdad Zolghadr states that "[g]race and legibility aside, it's not hard to see the

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Molesworth, "Man With a Movie Camera," [Artforum](#), 1 Jan. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Helen Molesworth, "Man With a Movie Camera," [Artforum](#), 1 Jan. 2008.

<sup>3</sup> "Karaoke's Creator Wins Ig Nobel Prize," [All Things Considered](#), NPR, 1 Oct. 2004, 15 Sept. 2007 <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4057291>>.

soothing force of repetition in a light that is pleasurable, in a mildly psychotic sort of way."<sup>4</sup>

Marisa Olson examines the power of "American Idol" to dominate its spectators with the excitement of its staged competition. In her video *The One That Got Away*, Olson parodies an "American Idol" audition by placing herself in the role of failed contestant. During the 2004 presidential election, in which, according to the artist, her generation seemed more inclined to vote for the next "Idol" than the next president, Olson created a blog about her training for the competition. Pitched as an oblique political campaign, Olson asked readers to vote on what she should wear to the audition and which song to sing. At a time when people would not stand in line at the polls for even 15 minutes, Olson realized that they would gladly line up for several hours or days to audition for "American Idol."

The video *he who laughs last laughs longest* (2006) by Glasgow-based artist Phil Collins consists of a laughing contest between a group of people vying for a cash prize. Made to mark the 80th anniversary of John Logie Baird's invention of television and filmed in his birthplace, Helensburgh, Argyll, Scotland, Collins' work suggests the underside of reality TV competition through video-based performance.

Although initially funny, the forced laughter ultimately elicits a feeling of apprehension compounded by the claustrophobic gallery installation. Throughout the event, organized in a village hall, the participants were prompted by a cowbell to laugh as hard as possible for sustained intervals, and Collins captures the resulting delirious, demented and fatigued expressions of human beings under duress. A reflection of how we imitate what we see on screen, Collins enacts a staged spectacle that constitutes a form of anti-entertainment.

Candice Breitz reproduces the experience of traumatic repetition in her video installation *Karaoke*, which depicts pop music as deafening, monotonous noise. This work features ten television monitors installed in a circle. Each screen shows a different non-native English speaker singing the Roberta Flack song "Killing Me Softly." Played at a high decibel level, the songs are not synchronized, creating a cacophonous auditory experience that portrays karaoke as a medium for the linguistic transfer of pop culture. Breitz's work challenges the definition of culture by inserting karaoke into a typically "high art" context, placing randomly selected individuals in situations that speak to the appeal of popular culture. For such cultural consumers, a karaoke song list provides a one-stop shopping experience. The songs that made a recording artist famous are placed into a randomized and mundane context, removing both music and musician from a primary, exalted status. Breitz's *Karaoke* becomes an ironic, and

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<sup>4</sup> Tirdad Zolghadr, "Critical Karaoke," *Modern Painters*, 23 Oct. 2007.

potentially critical engagement for the participant in which roles are reversed and the pop star's audience takes center stage.

David Herbert grants himself access to pop stardom through his homemade video performances in which he appears, nerdy and disaffected, singing Black Sabbath's "Iron Man," David Bowie's "Ziggy Stardust" and Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody." Constructing instruments out of found materials (plywood, Styrofoam, string, latex and paint), Herbert performs the ersatz instruments by faintly humming the sounds they would make if they were real. *Imagine* presents a non-functioning replica of the piano John Lennon plays in his famous music video. In contrast to the bravado of the rock star performance backed by expensive concert orchestration, Herbert's humorous blend of crude materials and deadpan delivery suggests a kind of anti-stardom in which the amateur singer performs a parodied critique as compelling in its own way as the entertaining spectacles of David Bowie or Ozzy Osbourne. Both Herbert and the pop star enact a spectacle. However, Bowie and Osbourne maintain the pretense of originality while Herbert reveals in his reenactment the calculated staging of performance and artistic personas.

In *Walt's*, Joel Armor uses the karaoke machine as a medium through which we may express ourselves to others. *Walt's* is a site-specific sculptural installation that functions as a bar when the artist hosts karaoke every Monday night throughout the exhibition. Appropriating the concept of an American-style karaoke bar, the artist introduces this idea in the context of an art exhibition, providing the opportunity for us to see this increasingly popular social activity anew.

Ryan Mulligan provides an experience analogous to a dream or switching from one television program to another in his performance *i invented a restaurant that only serves side dishes*. Mulligan uses the connotations of channel surfing, inattentiveness and hyperactivity as conceptual strategies in his wildly varied talks and lectures. While television informs his process, Mulligan also parodies lectures and other stage presentations. He projects his voice using a microphone attached to a karaoke machine, suggesting the artist's ironic relationship to his own voice and to performance in general. Mulligan disrupts the objective, academic lecture by inserting his subjectivity, revealing himself as "open book." Rather than delivering a cohesive narrative on a particular subject, the artist pieces together multiple stories that are tangential, anecdotal and disjointed. Recounting traumatic events such as his father's funeral or delivering a short history lesson on macaroni salad, Mulligan deflects painful memories with sudden subject shifts, changing the mood of the performances from moment to moment.

In 1999, Time magazine named Daisuke Inoue one of the 20th century's

most influential Asians, arguing that he "had helped to liberate legions of the once unvoiced: as much as Mao Zedong or Mohandas Gandhi changed Asian days, Inoue transformed its nights."<sup>5</sup> In his video *Mao Songs*, Mark Harris continues his project of exploring contemporary Chinese voice and how individuals process history by reenacting it through song. Harris invited 35 Beijing musicians to perform, in their respective musician idioms, Mao's Long March poems, which tell the story of a significant episode in the history of the Chinese Communist Party. The performance styles range from opera to karaoke, reflecting the diverse voices of contemporary Chinese citizens as well as the aspirations of this heroic figure. Tirdad Zolghadr states, "When it comes to discussing reenactment, for example, someone will always note that history repeats itself as a farce, while others will claim reenactments question representations of the past."<sup>6</sup>

In *Over and Over*, Reid Radcliffe explores repetition in the context of human relationships. Singing the song "Crimson and Clover," Radcliffe transforms a nude model's leg into an air guitar. Using her foot as the neck of the guitar, he fingers the "fret" and consequently tickles her. The song builds and the music forces him to play more vigorously. He struggles to maintain composure and subdue his "instrument" as she kicks and thrashes about. A commentary on male-female power dynamics, the work also suggests how pop culture exerts force over the artistic process. The song controls him as much as he controls her. The model's willingness to be played relates to the literal translation of the Japanese word karaoke as "empty orchestra." Although the empty orchestra implies passivity, the performer would have nothing to play without the instruments.

Christian Jankowski also explores repetition in male-female relationships in his karaoke installation *The Day We Met*, which features the artist in a series of canned, saccharine-sweet karaoke videos. Jankowski commissioned the largest karaoke company in Korea, Taijin Media, to cast him as the central protagonist in four different karaoke videos, in which he acts out similar boy-meets-girl soap opera scenarios with four different women. While karaoke videos typically serve as generic backdrops to illustrate karaoke song lyrics, Jankowski uses them as a subversive means to engage ideas of tourism and globalization as well as individual and group identity. In the video, this German artist stands in stark contrast to the Asian culture around him. The title of this work suggests a singular day when the artist met a woman and fell in love. But by replacing the women in each of the similarly constructed story lines, Jankowski compels us to examine the myth of the fairy tale love story and what it conceals, particularly

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<sup>5</sup> Pico Iyer, "With his now ubiquitous karaoke machine, this laid-back Japanese inventor provided the soundtrack for millions of wannabe Sinatras and Madonnas" *TIME*, 23-30 Aug. 1999, <<http://www.time.com/time/asia/asia/magazine/1999/990823/inoue1.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> Tirdad Zolghadr, "Critical Karaoke," *Modern Painters*, 23 Oct. 2007.

how it functions in diverse cultural contexts. The viewer ironically sings along to the artist's individual expression through mass-produced songs.

In his installation of musical instruments for *The Ballad of Toma*, Jose Versoza literally articulates the concept of karaoke as an empty orchestra. This ongoing participatory piece began with the discovery of an anonymous 16-year-old boy's letter posted on the Internet. Versoza appropriated this letter, gave the boy the name of "Toma, the Great Explorer" at the boy's request and asked poet Dana Ward to write a song using Toma's text. Bob Kellison transcribed the song into its musical score. Though visitors have never heard *The Ballad of Toma*, they are asked to perform their own musical interpretation of the work.

Created by artist Mehdi Hercberg (shoboshobo), *Motor Karaoke* features an interactive computer software program powered by voice. In this work, visitors are invited to don motorcycle helmets outfitted with microphones into which they scream, thereby controlling the pace of the motorcycles on the video screen. Employing technology to physically engage rather than entertain, Hercberg provides an alternative to merely observing art. *Motor Karaoke* allows for vocal intervention in a typically quiet environment and facilitates what is normally considered to be the behavior of unruly children. The work flips the premise that contemporary art centers should serve as somber spaces of hushed reflection, permitting play in an otherwise controlled white cube.

With participatory work by artists such as Mehdi Hercberg, *American Idyll* hopes to simultaneously inspire audio-visual pleasure and critical engagement by the visitor. While Jose Versoza, Joel Armor and Christian Jankowski allow for amateur musical participation, artists Candice Breitz and Phil Collins designed their work to physically encompass the visitor in a surround-sound experience. Marisa Olson and David Herbert entertain and critique the premise of musical stardom with self-conscious video performances that parody pop spectacle, and Reid Radcliffe explores human beings as both active and passive instruments. Celebrating short attention spans, Ryan Mulligan delivers sidetrack monologues that expose the artist's inner voice to the audience. In *Mao Songs*, Mark Harris questions whether the musical voice can serve as a form of utopia. Each of the artists in *American Idyll* dispenses with a singular notion of talent and indulges amateur-based vocal performance as a means to illuminate other facets of reality left out of televised talent competitions.