

A Brief Personal History of dorkbot-nyc

Douglas Repetto

I moved to New York City in the spring of 2000 to start a new job at the Columbia University Computer Music Center (CMC). Having spent the previous three years in rural Vermont and New Hampshire in relative artistic and social isolation, I was excited to jump into the cultural chaos of the city. My background was mostly in “experimental” art and music, which ideally means an openness to creative expression in any form, and an eagerness to explore ideas that are probably not going to take you to Carnegie Hall. I knew hardly anyone in New York, but I knew the place was full of weirdos, and I wanted to know them. I started a series of informal meetings called dorkbot-nyc, with the idea that people from around the city could share their experiments with one another.

In Vermont and New Hampshire I had spent most of my time with my friends and mentors, composer/performers Jody Diamond and Larry Polansky. Years ago they founded the Frog Peak Composers Collective (<http://frogpeak.org>), a small press and distributor of musical scores, recordings, and whatnots (including bottles of inedible artist-produced olive oil). I was moved and inspired by Frog Peak’s somewhat fuzzy mission statement:

Frog Peak Music is ... committed to the idea of availability over promotion. Member artists determine which of their own works are included in Frog Peak, and how they are included... the collective... provides an example of some of the ways that artists might control their own work in a non-commercial, non-hierarchical fashion, erasing distinctions between artist and publisher.

So when I arrived in New York, I had collectives and sharing on the brain. It was a time in Internet culture when online sharing and collaboration were really taking off, as well as generating a lot of debate and controversy (remember “file sharing”?). The heroic solo hacker culture seemed to be waning, and the “sharing economy” was emerging.

In 1996 I had started, with Tom Erbe, then at CalArts, an email list called “music-dsp” for people interested in learning about musical digital signal processing. Managing that list and the strong personalities that emerged was a challenge for me, but the payoff was engaging with many people who shared my interest in exploring the possibilities of combining code and sound. I liked helping people connect and share their ideas, but now I wanted to do it in person!

New to the city, knowing no one, but hungry for in-person sharing of ideas and energy, I went to Brad Garton, director of the CMC, and proposed a series of monthly meetings where creative people from around New York City could share what they’re working on. Brad gave an enthusiastic yes. A couple years earlier the CMC had hosted what were called “bark meetings,” where composers associated with the Center would share their computer music work with one another, but that it had run its course. He was game to try again, and the CMC agreed to provide space and tech (speakers and a projector) for the meetings in crumbly Prentis Hall on 125th Street in West Harlem.

I needed a name for these meetings—something fun and casual, nerdy but not too specific. At some point I remembered “dorkbot,” a word made up by my friend Joel Fox when we were in grad school

at CalArts. It stuck. I added the tag line: “people doing strange things with electricity.” That was a mistake: it should have been just “people doing strange things”—the word “electricity” made many people question whether what they were doing (with code, with bio-hacking, with live performance, etc.) qualified. Over the years I would trot out an iffy explanation that pretty much everything in our world relies on electricity in one way or another, but I wish I had rethought that phrase at the outset.

I set up a couple email lists on the CMC server: “dorkbotnyc-blabber” for general discussion of making things in NYC, and “dorkbotnyc-announce” for publicizing meetings. My prior experience running the music-dsp mailing list made me think that having a discussion list to go along with the meetings would be valuable. I imagined people sharing tips on where to buy motors on Canal Street, instructions on tapping into power on a subway platform, or asking for help with a flash mob (remember those?). It turned out that in NYC the blabber list was never super active, but later in some other cities it became an essential resource.

I put up a quick website, invented a bunch of FAQs, and we were off! I asked around a bit to see who would like to present at the first meeting, and found Brian Whitman, then a graduate student in Natural Language Processing at Columbia, and Michael Goggins, a composer and friend of the CMC. I would be the third. On December 6, 2000, we had our first dorkbot-nyc meeting. I think there were about ten people in the audience; unfortunately, no one thought to take any photos or video!

The first few meetings were small (I recall that there were seven people at one). But I was getting to know more “people doing strange things” in the city, and I was starting to build up a list of those who said they’d like to participate, so I kept organizing monthly meetings.

I was announcing the meetings on various art/tech mailing lists, which tended to have international subscribers, and from the start strangers from elsewhere in United States and from around the world emailed to say they thought dorkbot sounded interesting. At some point in that first year I received an email from Alex McLean and Ade Ward in London, who I had met at an algorithmic art conference in Milan. They had been doing similar geeky social events in London and suggested that going forward they might use the name dorkbot-london. I was amazed—it hadn’t occurred to me that dorkbot might spread! We set up a webpage and mailing lists for dorkbot-london, and they had their first meeting in November of 2001. In the next few months I received similar email requests from Jan de Pauw and Guy Van Belle in Ghent, Belgium, and Karen Marcelo in San Francisco—more dorkbots! Over the next several years nearly 80 independent dorkbots spawned around the globe. We had a mailing list called dorkbot-overlords for people organizing the various dorkbot events, and from there were hatched all manner of projects.

At the same time, attendance at dorkbot-nyc meetings was growing, and lots of people were interested in giving presentations. The small room we used at the CMC was overflowing, and I started looking for larger spaces we could use at Columbia. At each meeting I would say: “If you’d like to give a presentation, just contact me, and I’ll put you on the schedule.” Lots of people responded, but for the first several months all the presenters were male, and nearly all white.

My earnest “open to everyone” spirit was good, but the effect wasn’t what I hoped for. I learned something important that has served me well ever since: if you ask a question and the answer seems off, then maybe it’s time to rethink your question. The answer to “who will come up and tell me they

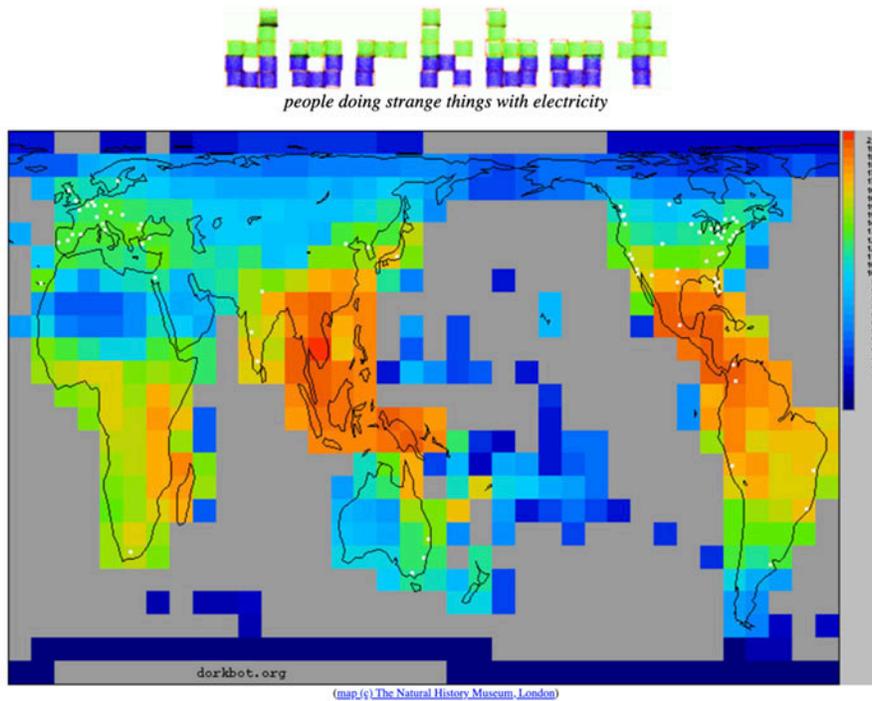
should be on the schedule” was “almost no one but white men.” It was time to change the question. In addition to making my “just contact me” pitch at each meeting, I started actively reaching out to people who popped up on my radar and seemed interesting—recommendations from friends, artists whose work I admired, quiet people who came to meetings and sat by themselves. Some of my very favorite dorkbot presentations came from those invitations—like the time the very shy members of the band Neg-Fi sat at a stark black table for 20 minutes while their little feedback boxes crackled, or when Caitlin Berrigan poured chocolate into her Viral Confections molds and shared hepatitis C virus-shaped bonbons with a slightly nervous audience (yummm!).

As word spread about the meetings, people started contacting me asking if dorkbot wanted to do events, or write articles, or be on panels. I was hesitant to do too much personally as “dorkbot,” since I didn’t really feel dorkbot was anything other than an open spirit and a simple format. I always encouraged presenters to keep things informal, “as if someone at a party asked you what you’re interested in.” This helped make the presentations more accessible to a broad audience (although there were plenty of blank stares and awkward silences), but these were by no means TED talks.

In early 2004 Claire Montgomery and Heather Wagner from a non-profit SoHo gallery called Location One contacted me to see if dorkbot and Location One might work together. It was a perfect match, since their mission was to support experimental art through installations, performances, and other public events. They had a beautiful, conveniently located space, and a friendly staff happy to help make dorkbot happen every month. It was dreamy. We had our first meeting there in April of 2004, and for the next decade Location One hosted nearly every dorkbot. Putting on events is a lot of (often thankless) work, and we would have never have survived 13 years without the support of the lovely people at Location One.

SoHo is a highly visible neighborhood, and after some friendly press exposure (including an article in *The New Yorker*), we started getting larger crowds, up to 150 people or so. Even when meetings got big, we still followed the same basic plan: we’d play a dorkbot theme song (people would send new ones occasionally); I’d give a quick introduction to dorkbot culture, and invite people to contact me to give presentations in the future; then we’d have three 20-minute presentations separated by short breaks. Bleep bloop blorp, we’d be in and out in 90 minutes. Afterwards I’d head to Chinatown with some friends for dim sum. What a wonderful time that was!

At the same time, dorkbot meetings continued to pop up around the world. Some really took off and had regular meetings for years. Other never quite got off the ground, or had one or two meetings and then petered out. I always said “yes” when someone asked to start a dorkbot—it was an experiment in giving up control. I’d send a document that outlined the basic concept: short, informal presentations on interesting topics; everyone is welcome; everyone can give a presentation; avoid money if possible. I’d set them up with a website and mailing lists, add them to the dorkbot-overlords list, and that was that. While dorkbot meetings in each city tended to share that basic format, there were no rules, no dues to pay, no contracts. Dorkbot was not a legal entity of any sort, and anyone could use the name. We relied on good will to keep the dorkbot spirit pumping. Sometimes I got the chance to visit meetings in other cities, or organizers from other places would come to New York and we’d get to meet in person.



CELEBRATING 0x12 YEARS OF HOT NERD ON GEEK ACTION!!!

[new york \(nyc\)](#) . [london](#) . [gent](#) . [san francisco \(sf\)](#) . [linz](#) . [melbourne](#) . [mumbai](#)
[seattle \(sea\)](#) . [rotterdam](#) . [lisbon](#) . [sofia](#) . [chicago \(chi\)](#) . [southern california \(social\)](#) . [barcelona](#)
[switzerland \(swiss\)](#) . [orlando](#) . [madrid](#) . [detroit](#) . [ciudad de méxico \(cdmexico\)](#) . [philadelphia](#)
[medellín \(mde\)](#) . [toronto](#) . [berlin \(bln\)](#) . [eindhoven](#) . [tijuana](#) . [rio de janeiro](#)
[stockholm \(sthlm\)](#) . [scotland \(alba\)](#) . [tokyo](#) . [budapest](#) . [atlanta \(atl\)](#) . [pittsburgh \(pgh\)](#)
[bangalore](#) . [south florida \(sofla\)](#) . [bogota \(bta\)](#) . [lima](#) . [beijing \(bj\)](#) . [izmir](#)
[cleveland \(cle\)](#) . [montreal \(mtl\)](#) . [austin](#) . [saskatoon \(sask\)](#) . [washington, dc \(dc\)](#)
[dayton \(day\)](#) . [portland \(pdx\)](#) . [vienna](#) . [vancouver \(van\)](#) . [columbus](#) . [boston \(bos\)](#) . [bristol](#)
[colorado \(303\)](#) . [sydney](#) . [buffalo](#) . [helsinki](#) . [tacoma \(tac\)](#) . [oldenburg \(oldb\)](#)
[paris](#) . [manchester](#) . [milano \(mil\)](#) . [silicon valley \(sv\)](#) . [second life \(sl\)](#) . [salvador](#)
[copenhagen \(cph\)](#) . [canarias](#) . [valencia \(espana\)](#) . [brussels \(bru\)](#) . [sebastopol](#) . [bremen \(hb\)](#)
[state college, pa \(psu\)](#) . [canberra \(cbr\)](#) . [adelaide](#) . [baltimore \(bmore\)](#)
[montevideo \(mvd\)](#) . [göteborg \(gbg\)](#) . [ottawa](#) . [seoul](#) . [albuquerque \(abq\)](#) . [raleigh \(rdy\)](#)
[brescia \(bsa\)](#) . [las vegas \(lv\)](#) . [tucuman \(tucu\)](#) . [aachen \(ac\)](#) . [calgary](#) . [newcastle \(ncl\)](#)
[lexington \(lex\)](#) . [black rock city \(brc\)](#) . [buenos aires \(baires\)](#) . [shanghai](#) . [perth](#)
[cologne \(ccaa\)](#) . [hong kong \(hk\)](#) . [rome \(roma\)](#) . [anglia](#) . [ensenada \(dorkbotopenclass\)](#)
[nantes](#) . [edmonton](#) . [sao paulo](#) . [sheffield](#) . [cardiff](#) . [indianapolis \(indy\)](#) . [istanbul](#)
[buga \(colombia\)](#) . [auburn](#) . [regina](#) . [potteries \(uk\)](#) . [st. louis \(stl\)](#)

soon: [sarnia](#) . [cambridge \(UK\)](#) . [providence](#) . [bucharest](#) . [charlotte](#) . [denton](#) . [minneapolis/st paul \(msp\)](#)
[tucson](#) . [euskal](#) . [lanark](#) . [gainesville \(gny\)](#) . [delhi](#) . [south africa \(za\)](#)
[arizona \(az\)](#) . [windsor](#) . [brisbane](#) . [israel \(isr\)](#) . [florence](#) . [barrie](#) . [sarnia](#) . [singapore \(sg\)](#)
[euregio \(netherlands\)](#) . [cba \(cordoba\)](#) . [munich](#) . [bryan/college station \(bcs\)](#)
[birmingham, uk \(brum\)](#) . [nuremberg \(nbg\)](#) . [manila \(mnl\)](#) . [miami](#)
[southampton, uk \(soton\)](#) . [normal](#) . [shreveport](#) . [bangkok \(bkk\)](#) . [brighton](#) . [penzance, uk](#) . [plymouth, uk](#)

Figure 1 dorkbot.org homepage. Figure by Douglas Repetto, used by permission.

There is nothing particularly original about the idea of dorkbot. People have been getting together to share work and ideas with one another for ages, whether in a cozy cave, an ornate salon, or a shabby co-working space on Broadway. Various themed meet-ups became popular in New York during dorkbot-nyc's run, and several other sharing/social/arts organizations appeared around the same time. Something was in the air. I'm sure I'm forgetting a few, but in particular I remember share.nyc (open audio-visual jamming nights), The Upgrade! (art and technology forum), and Madagascar Institute (public art collective). There was so much happening in New York City that we never wanted for presenters or audience.

Over its thirteen-year run, dorkbot-nyc featured hundreds of presentations (as of summer 2019 at least two other dorkbots, London and San Francisco, are still semi-active.) Sometimes we attracted mainstream press or big crowds, and sometimes we managed good documentation. Often we were just 20 people in a room talking about things that seemed important. I was so fortunate to meet many kind and creative people through dorkbot, and to make several life-long friends (hi LoVid!). I ended dorkbot-nyc when I no longer felt I could do a good job of running it. Rather than try to pass it along to someone and preserve the “institution,” I preferred to make room for another idea to bubble up and take things in new directions. Our creativity is boundless—let’s share the worlds we create.