

Playing in virtual four-lane traffic a tad unnerving

New York artist's new media piece gives viewers a cathartic scare

GILBERT A. BOUCHARD
Special to The Journal
EDMONTON

Don Ritter wants you to play in traffic.

Well, not so much traffic as four lanes of virtual traffic the New York-based new media artist recreates in a sound installation called Intersection. During the Works, Ritter's complicated interactive project occupies a darkened room on the second floor of Scotia Place.

It features eight huge speakers, 800 metres of cable and a complicated array of computer-controlled infrared sensors.

As visitors work their way across a room illuminated only by a dim pair of exit signs, they can't help but break the invisible beams that crisscross the space, setting off a complex chain reaction of traffic noises. Carefully orchestrated to duplicate the Doppler effect (the sudden drop in the pitch of a car engine's roar as the vehicle passes by a stationary listener), the din of the cars that tear by and seemingly recede into the distance unnerves visitors.

If they stand in one of the four "traffic lanes" too long, the computerized installation creates the sound of a car grinding to a halt and then, if the hapless visitors

stand still a bit longer, they hear the clamour of several chain-reaction crashes.

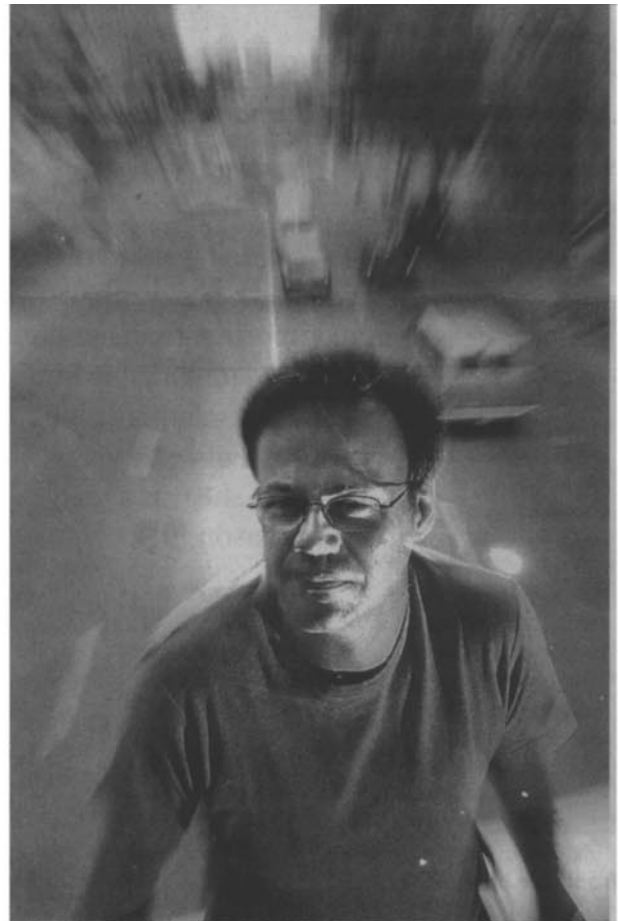
Aiming to create a new generation of interactive, installation art, Ritter believes that new media should engage the whole body and "not just the index finger" moving a mouse on old-school virtual reality computer-bound projects.

"My belief is that new media should ... be as unencumbered as possible, with no gloves and no helmets, and be multi-user," says Ritter, who was raised in Camrose. He now teaches at the Pratt Institute in New York but started off his career as a high-level research engineer for Nortel.

"I was one of the human interface designers who helped design the surprisingly complicated credit card interface on pay-phones."

Intersection was first designed in the mid-'90s and has proven to be his most popular and best-travelled show, having been mounted 12 times in seven countries. Ritter says the show is particularly popular in Germany, where they treat new media artists "like princes" in large part because of a totally different attitude towards technology.

"Where we see technology mainly as a medium for industry, they see technol-



SHAUGHN BUTTS, THE JOURNAL

New York audio artist Don Ritter, who makes art from traffic noise, is featured at the Works Art and Design Festival.

ogy as having a cultural reality as well."

Edmonton is only the third Canadian city to host this exhibit.

The reason for the popularity of the show probably has much to do with the universality of its subject matter.

"Cars are really symbolic, but this show isn't just about cars and traffic. This installation is also about stepping into the unknown and the stress most of us feel about the unknown," he says.

"It's also a very cathartic show in that you get really scared feeling like you're about to get hit by a car, but

nobody gets hurt and nothing really happens."

Intersection fits into his larger body of work in that it sets out to create a physical manifestation of a cultural symbol.

In 1997, Ritter designed TV Guides, a show featuring a room with a couch and a functioning TV set. The trick was, the TV would only play in an uninterrupted fashion — the signal not being broken by messages hectoring visitors to sit still — if visitors sat still on the sofa, couch potato style.

"It was a great exercise and an exaggerated way to present some of Marshall McLuhan's ideas about media consumption and manipulation."