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Art Space Talk: Don Ritter

<http://myartspace-blog.blogspot.com/2007/10/art-space-talk-don-ritter.html>

Don Ritter is a Canadian artist and writer living in Berlin, Germany. Since 1986, he has created electronic artworks that audiences control with their bodies, voices, or music. His large scale video-sound installations have been exhibited at festivals and museums throughout Europe, North America and Asia, including SITE Santa Fe in New Mexico, Metrònom in Barcelona, Ars Electronica in Linz, Sonambiente Sound Festival in Berlin, New Music America in New York, and ArtFuture 2000 in Taipei. He is considered a pioneer of interactive video-sound installations and performances.

Brian Sherwin: Don, I understand that you were born in Canada. You are currently living in Berlin, Germany. How did moving to Berlin make an impact on your art? Did you move to Germany for your work?

Don Ritter: Yes, I was born in Camrose, a small city near Edmonton, Alberta. I also lived in Toronto, Boston, Montreal or Brooklyn between 1979 and 2005, and in 2006 I moved to Berlin. My move to Germany was important for my art career because for the previous 16 years I had been a full-time professor of art; now I can focus completely on my art activities.

Culture and art are very important to many people in Germany, especially in Berlin, making it an invigorating place for anyone in the arts. The country has a very intellectual and serious approach to culture and it seems especially fond of artworks that are dark and brooding, such as those by Max Beckmann, George Grosz, or Joseph Beuys. I am not sure if Berlin provides more opportunities to an artist than one living in New York City, but it offers a rich cultural environment and a large studio at a lower cost. Since I began exhibiting in 1988, my work has always received support from Europe--especially from Germany-- but the main reason I moved to Berlin was because of a personal relationship that started in 2003.



FIT, interactive video and sound installation, 5 x 9 m, 1993

BS: Don, you are considered a pioneer of interactive video-sound installations and performances. Since 1986 your works have been exhibited at festivals and museums throughout North America, Europe and Asia. With that said, can you recall your early years... how did you get your start?

DR: I had been drawing, painting and making sculptures since I was six years old, but I was also interested in electronics—especially audio and video equipment. I was repairing the family television set at 10 years old, and by high school I was an audiophile. I started oil painting when I was seventeen and copied Van Goghs and Picassos. After completing high school, I studied electronics engineering at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, hoping this background would support my future art interests. After I completed these studies, I worked for the telecommunications company Northern Telecom in Toronto. I worked in an engineering department on the design of telephone switching systems, large electronic boxes that connect together thousands of telephones, but I would paint in the evenings and on weekends. I had a few exhibitions in Toronto during those days, and some of my friends and engineering colleagues bought my paintings. After three years working in telecommunication design, I started studying fine arts at the University of Waterloo in Ontario. I also started a second degree in psychology at Waterloo with a concentration in social psychology. During my fine art studies, I painted, sculpted, and made a few installations with sound. My favorite professor at Waterloo was artist Basia Irland, who now teaches at the University of New Mexico. During my summer breaks, I worked for Bell-Northern Research (BNR) as a human interface designer. My colleagues at BNR were mostly European industrial psychologists who specialized in human cognition and perception. That experience was very important to my development as an artist because it led to my understanding of human interfaces, which I would later use within my interactive installations. My artworks during this time tended to be very organic and they usually contained human forms, but no electronics. My influences included Joseph Beuys, Eva Hesse, William de Kooning, Francis Bacon, and Titian.

BS: Don, I've read that you've studied film at Harvard University. Who were your mentors during that time? Also, care to give our readers more information about your academic past? Where did you study... have you taught as well?

DR: After I finished the undergraduate degrees at Waterloo, I began my graduate studies in 1986 at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I was officially a student of CAVS, but I also took classes at the Harvard Carpenter Center and the MIT Media Lab, a research facility that focuses on new media technologies. Since the 1960's, CAVS has a history of artists using video, lasers, holograms, and many other technologies. Artists who had been in residence at CAVS included Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Peter Campus, and Antonio Muntadas.

I first started combining my interest in art, technology, and psychology at MIT in the form of videotapes, electronic music, video installations, and computer animation. My primary professors during those studies were artist Otto Piene (MIT), film maker Richard Leacock (MIT), and film theorist Vladimir Petric (Harvard). MIT and Harvard are sister institutions, so students at one institution can take classes at the other. Petric had a sincere enthusiasm about film and life, and through him I learned about cinematography and film history. Through Leacock, I learned how to make documentary videos, which would become important for documenting my installations. Otto Piene is a German artist who has a long history of working with technology in the creation of very large artworks. Otto was the director of CAVS and my primary advisor.

In my final semester, I developed a software, called Orpheus, that enabled video to be controlled by live music or sensors. I used this software to create my master's thesis, a 30 x 30 ft interactive video installation titled Stithy (1988). Orpheus became the technical basis of my work for many years. At MIT I also made interactive performances that featured video controlled by live music. My primary collaborator was trombonist George Lewis, an improviser and pioneer of interactive music. In conjunction with an electronic music class, our first performance was presented at the MIT Media Lab in 1988. Between 1988 and 1990, George and I performed at various new music festivals in US, Canada and Italy, including New Music America (NYC) and the Verona Jazz Festival.

I held full-time positions as a professor of art at Concordia University (Montreal) from 1989 to 1996 and at Pratt Institute (Brooklyn) from 1995 to 2005. I taught BFA and MFA students the use of new media technologies to create videos, animations, web sites, digital images, and installations. My main responsibilities at Pratt were to supervise MFA theses and develop curriculum for the artistic, non-commercial use of new media. I worked with many outstanding students at both schools.

BS: Since those early years your work has made a huge impact. For example, your installation *Intersection* (created in 1993) has been experienced by over 600,000 people in seven countries. How does it feel to know that so many people have interacted with your work?

DR: I am very happy that *Intersection* has been so well received over the years, and that it is still being exhibited today. *Intersection* is a very experiential work. Visitors respond to it quite emotionally and they find the work either funny or frightening.



Intersection, interactive sound installation, dark space, 16 x 13m, 1993

BS: Don, *Intersection* is one of your most widely exhibited works. *Intersection* is an interactive sound installation presented in a large dark room. The work presents the sounds of four lanes of car traffic that respond to audiences by screeching to a halt, idling, accelerating or crashing into each other. Can you recall your thoughts behind this piece? What inspired you to create it?

DR: Although I had used audio in previous works, *Intersection* was my first sound installation. The idea behind *Intersection* is based on an experience I had as a teenager. I was walking down a street one evening and encountered two freight trains that were stopped on parallel tracks crossing the street. To continue on my way, I crawled over the first train; when I was standing between the trains--which were less than three feet apart--they both started moving in opposite directions. Fearing I might be hit by something sticking out from a train car, I lay down on the ground, parallel to the trains while they increased in speed. This situation went on for a few minutes until the last cars had passed. It was quite frightening because I didn't know if I would get hurt or not. I didn't get hurt, but it was still a stupid thing to do.

Intersection is a reference to that experience, but not in a literal sense. It refers to our fear of the unknown, the fear of not knowing if we have encountered something harmful. The installation is exhibited in a completely dark room, usually 45 x 40 ft. After entering the installation, people hear four lanes of car traffic traveling across the room and through the darkness. If people intersect with a passing car as they move across the room, the car will screech to a halt and remaining idling in front of them. If a person moves away from the path of a stopped car, it will accelerate and continue across the room. If a person remains in front of a stopped car for more than a few seconds, the sounds of subsequent cars traveling down that lane will smash into the stopped car.

BS: Don, one of your most recent works is titled Vox Populi, an interactive video installation that enables audience members to become leaders by reading political speeches to a large projection of a cheering crowd. Can you tell our readers about the motives you had behind this piece?



Vox Populi, interactive video and sound installation, 13 x 15m, 2005

DR: Vox Populi was completed in 2005, but the idea developed around 1994. The installation enables visitors to feel like leaders while reading political speeches from a lectern to a video projected crowd. The lectern has a microphone and also a computer screen containing historical political speeches. As a person reads a speech within the installation, a computer analyzes the speaker's voice, determines the speed of the scrolling speech, and selects the response of the video projected crowd as being supportive or not. The specific speeches used in the installation are less important to me than having visitors feel like leaders, like they are controlling others through their speeches. The installation uses one or three video projections, depending on the size of the space. When it was shown at SITE Sante Fe in 2005, three video projections were used to create a 45 x 12 foot video image of a screaming crowd—it was very intimidating.



O telephone, 8 channel interactive sound installation, 6 x 6m, 2007

My most recent work is *O telephone* (2007), an interactive sound installation. Within *O telephone*, six modified 1960's telephones are arranged in a circle within a darkened room and each randomly rings with a distinctive sound. If a viewer answers a ringing phone, "om" is heard through the handset and through the body of the phone. When viewers answer other ringing phones, the resulting "om" sounds will pan through all the answered phones and create a circle of audio traveling around the viewers. If no ringing telephones are answered, the telephones spontaneously begin a new composition comprised of "om" sounds. The idea for this work came from my yoga practice while living in Brooklyn. Hearing twenty people chant "om" is a very calming experience. According to Hinduism, "om" is the sound of existence.



O telephone, 8 channel interactive sound installation, 6 x 6m, 2007

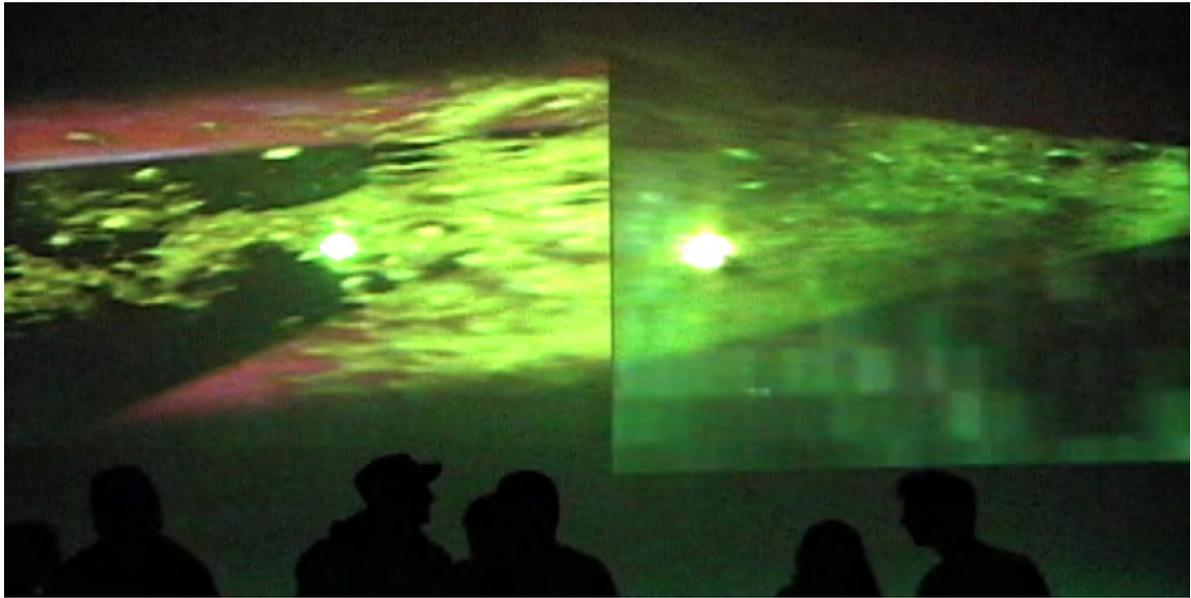
BS: Don, your work was initially recognized by institutions associated with new media art, such as Ars Electronica and MIT, but it now receives more recognition from museums and festivals of contemporary art. What do you think caused this shift in interest?

DR: I think there are a few reasons for this change. Since the early 1990's, many of the international festivals that focus on new media art have become increasingly interested in commercial applications of digital technologies and less interested in work containing a fine art component. Also, many of the smaller new media festivals cannot accommodate large or costly installations. *Intersection* is relatively expensive to exhibit because the organizer must prepare a completely dark room, provide a multi-channel sound system, ship my equipment, provide my transportation and accommodation, etc. It seems that fine art venues are more able to afford my work. Also, I think the humanistic aspect of my work is of more interest to fine art venues than new media ones.

I used to aggrandize the technologies within my installations, but I now downplay their role. I still spend many hours dealing with the technical construction of my works, but I am now more interested in how my works are relevant to audiences. For me, the medium of an artwork is less important than its meaning. I think this perspective is also of more interest to the fine art world than the new media art scene.

I have spoken to many new media curators regarding the acceptance of new media art into the contemporary art world, and most say that it has not happened to a great degree. I think the reason for this situation is that new media art is often evaluated according to its technology, while contemporary art is usually judged according to its relationship with art history. When I exhibit at a new media venue, people are always interested in which technology I use--such as the model of computer—but fine art venues are relatively unconcerned about those details.

BS: Dottie Indyke (ARTnews) stated the following about your work-- "Ritter's play with his viewers' phobias recalls the anxiety-provoking tendencies of Surrealism." With that said? Would you say that there is a great deal of psychology within the context of your work? What are your motives behind revealing-- or exploring-- the human condition? The majority of new media work is about the technology itself... why do you choose to study the human condition by utilizing technology?



Digestion, interactive video and sound installation or performance, 5 x 10m, 2003

DR: I think all artworks are about psychology, not just my own, because all artworks relate to how humans behave and think. I consider all media as mechanisms for promoting certain entities, making them more authoritative, more powerful, and wealthier. Artworks from the Italian Renaissance promoted the Papacy using imagery from the Bible, while contemporary works use modern imagery to promote something else. Since 2003, I have been writing a book on media literacy called *The e Decision*. The content of the text is based on interviews with art curators and information from the fields of art, psychology, philosophy, aesthetics, and new media technologies. The book explores the function of media in general and it proposes that all media—including artworks-- have the same general function: to promote something within a society. In my own artworks, I am less interested in contributing to this social mechanism, preferring instead to talk about the existence of these mechanisms and their functions.

I have always been interested in psychology and considered becoming a psychologist after I completed my BA in psychology. It took many years for me to realize that the content of my artworks are often reflections of social behavior. Within my installation *TV Guides* (1995), for instance, viewers encounter a living room with a television that plays live commercial broadcasts. In response to any movement by viewers within the installation, the television sound and imagery fade out, followed by text on the screen that requests viewers to remain motionless. The imagery and sound resume only after everyone within the installation is motionless for at least five seconds.

In many ways, my installations are like narratives with audiences as the actors. At one time, I was obsessed with using technology as an art medium, but I am now more interested in creating works that are meaningful. Artworks usually convey meaning through symbolism--certain imagery, symbols or whatever--but I am interested in conveying meaning by presenting audiences with particular experiences. In *TV Guides*, people feel the control of television, in *Vox Populi* they feel control over other people, and in *Intersection* they feel fear of the unknown.



TV Guides, interactive video and sound installation with live television, 8 x 5m, 1995

BS: Don, what are you working on at this time? Do you have any upcoming exhibitions?

DR: I am currently working on a collection of installations called *Roman Holidays*. The term “Roman Holiday” originates in the 19th century and it refers to any situation where people watch the suffering of others as entertainment, such as the gladiator events in ancient Rome. I see this phenomenon happening today as portrayals of real and fictitious suffering within films, television programs, news programs, newspapers, etc. The installations within the *Roman Holiday* series will permit audience members to enact suicide through interactive video and sound installations while being watched by other people.

My next exhibition is in Lille, France, October 11 to November 11 at the Maison Folie de Moulins. The festival is called Les Chants Mécaniques, and I will be presenting *Intersection* and *O telephone*. In November, I am speaking about *The e Decision* at the Interactive Futures conference in Victoria, Canada.

BS: Don, do you have any advice for installation artists who are just starting out?

DR: I think there are many factors that contribute to an installation artist’s success. The ones that I think are important are the following. Know what you want to say through your work and, also, what your audience thinks you are saying. Know your media; get familiar with all the aspects of installation art, including architecture, theater, visual art, music, robotics, and whatever. Know art history and world history, and how it relates to your work. And finally, know the art business and how to interact with audiences and curators. Unfortunately, I am not a master of these items, but I am pretty sure they are all important.

BS: Thank you for answering my questions.

DR: Thank you Brian!

You can learn more about Don Ritter by visiting his website at <http://aesthetic-machinery.com>

Take care, Stay true,
Brian Sherwin