

Do you have what it takes to be a leader — or a demagogue?

Don Ritter's Vox Populi exhibit lets gallery-goers test oratorical skills

Gilbert Bouchard



Multimedia artist Don Ritter wants people to get a visceral taste of the public life of a political leader when they participate in his Vox Populi exhibit.

This highly interactive piece at the Art Gallery of Alberta features a podium with a karaoke-style, voice-activated computer-screen prompter. Visitors can walk up and read out famous speeches from the likes of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Nazi leader Adolf Hitler and U.S. presidents John F. Kennedy and George W. Bush.

As they read a speech that's randomly scrolling up the screen, their performance is assessed by a computer program that in turn controls a video feed of a "crowd"—improvising actors projected much larger than life on the gallery wall facing the podium. The crowd can react with four levels of approval and disapproval, depending on how it measures the tempo, volume and duration of the speaker's voice.

Art fans who speak too softly or too slowly will find the crowd does, and will, turn on them in a loud, abusive manner.

"A lot of people say they don't like how our leaders lead," Ritter says. "Well, this piece lets you take the podium and see how well you'd be able to deliver a speech in front of a volatile audience."

"The idea of the show is to convey the content of the work—the exploration of what is the idea of leadership—in an experiential fashion."

Ritter was raised in Edmonton but now lives in Germany after teaching in the U.S. for several years. He was last in town in the summer of 2004 when his Intersection show—a piece that mimicked



PREVIEW

Don Ritter's Vox Populi, part of Crowds/Conversations/Confessions

Showing at: Art Gallery of Alberta,
2 Sir Winston Churchill Square
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the sounds you'd hear crossing four lanes of traffic—was displayed at the Works Festival. Vox Populi is part of a cutting-edge series of installation art pieces called Crowds/Conversations/Confessions, an exhibit of video and sound work that includes a piece by Canadian filmmaker Atom Egoyan.

The artist sees the piece asking some huge questions about leadership and builds in a "critique of a critique" in that it challenges the viewer's assessment of the leadership skill set.

"I'm also asking if a leader really is a leader if all they do is read a prepared text. To deal with that issue, the screen goes blank for a few seconds between texts so that the participant is forced to ad lib and speak their own words or go silent" and risk losing the crowd, he says.

This issue is embodied dramatically in TV shows like *The West Wing* and in movies, where heroic leaders regularly toss aside canned speeches to deliver their "real" impassioned message.

Ritter concedes that a lot of gallery vis-

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itors will never muster the nerve to participate in his piece and those who do are likely to be men.

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philosophical sense you can make a case that crowds can control speakers in the real world."