

Surrounded By Art; Site Santa Fe Show Makes Work Personal for Viewers

Dottie Indyke, Albuquerque Journal, 2005-09-23

As a rule, art doesn't rouse people to a fever pitch of emotion. In fact, writes Don Ritter, "a viewer who claps and cheers before a favorite painting within a museum may be considered to be insane and ushered to the front door by a solemn guard."

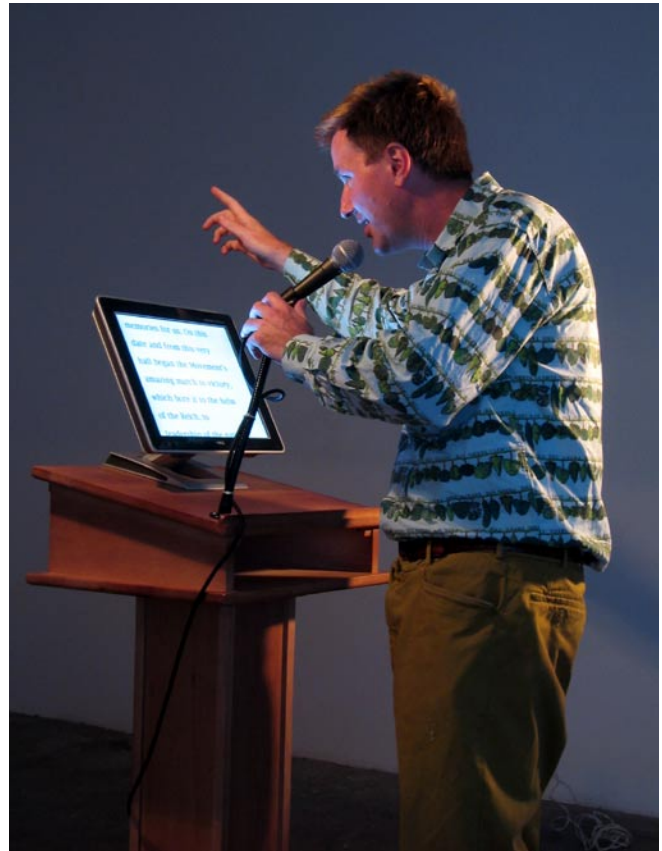
But Ritter makes work with the goal of inciting his viewers, moving beyond the silent, intellectual experience -- where no actual dialogue takes place -- to a more responsive, spontaneous process that engages both mind and body.

Two of Ritter's high-tech installations are part of a new exhibit, opening today at SITE Santa Fe. Sculptures by Charles Long and paintings by Dana Schutz are also featured.

"Vox Populi," a piece Ritter created last year, offers a chance to experience what it might be like to make a speech before a large crowd. On entering the darkened room, viewers are greeted by cat-calls encouraging them to step up to the podium, which is equipped with a microphone and a teleprompter with the text of speeches delivered by Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy and George W. Bush. Anyone brave enough to take the stage faces three large video screens filled with images of people ready to respond to the rhetorician's particular style. The crowd's reaction might be wild enthusiasm or it might be outright hostility.

"Vox" embodies Ritter's expertise in psychology, electronics engineering and art. He developed the computer software in the late 1980s, while a graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and initially used it in collaboration with musicians, where the computer produced images in response to live, improvised music. In his two SITE installations, instead of music controlling video, sensors respond to body motion and presence, and, in the case of "Vox Populi," voice.

"There are three characteristics I'm looking at," Ritter said. "First is tempo. The computer calculates the duration of pauses between words. The second is volume level. The third is the duration that you're speaking without interruption. There are many different combinations -- someone speaks at a very high volume but a very short duration. Or at low volume but a high tempo.



"The crowd itself has four different types of reactions," he added. "One is the encouraging reaction -- they say, 'Speech, speech!' And then they instantly go into mildly supportive (mode), clapping their hands and expressing a little interest. Based on that, the rules become more complicated," Ritter said. "They can acknowledge you as the new messiah or go into discouraging mode. One woman says, 'I never heard such crap in my life.'"

While most participants will likely perceive the visuals as staged -- Ritter combined video footage of professional and nonprofessional actors -- the sound track may prove a bit more intimidating.

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“In my experience, visuals are more capable of providing a logic of what is happening, but the audio aspect can make people feel uncomfortable or powerful,” he said. In New York City, the only place “Vox Populi” has previously been shown, the level of participation varied greatly. Men tended to step up to the podium more readily than women. Most doggedly stuck to the historical speeches, but a few adventurous individualists used the opportunity to practice their oratory skills. One man got so worked up he ripped his shirt off and he talked so long he had to be dragged from the lectern.

“Even from my perspective, this piece is funny,” Ritter said. “But it’s actually very serious as well. It’s one thing to criticize leaders, but to be a leader is a very difficult task.”

The vast majority of those who choose to make speeches simply read what is provided in a way that is as mindless and obedient as the crowd’s computer-controlled reactions.

A smart fellow

Ritter, who is a professor of art and design at Pratt Institute in New York City, has been intrigued with mechanical and electrical objects since he was a kid. At 10, he was repairing the family television, and in high school, he was a full-blown audio junkie. At the same time, he drew, painted and constructed objects. Apparently possessed of highly developed right and left brains, Ritter says math has always come easily -- he commits his students’ phone numbers to memory long before he knows their names -- but the world of art is his preferred milieu.

“I’m much more interested in applying the tools of technology to art,” he said. “And the media is less relevant than what is being conveyed through that artwork. I don’t really see electronic art as presenting concepts that are new -- just perceptually different.”

