

"Four Transcultural Case Studies: Transmedial Walks, Drives and Observations" or is everything posted?

This talk will discuss four different case studies related to complex technological works which were created through international collaborations.

- The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers / Ex.Mech (Premier Exhibition of ICC, Tokyo; shot in Australia and Former Yugoslavia)
- Red Dice / Des Chiffré (Commissioned by the National Gallery of Canada)
- Com↔Space (정영웅 Yeong-woong Cheong, Art Center Nabi, Seoul Korea)
- A China of Many Senses (Travels with Xiaowen Chen, Wexner Video Residency, Generative work with Todd Berreth at Duke)

The talk will discuss elements of language, culture, technological creation, and process.

I have been traveling to many places in the world for my work since the early 80s. I am somehow very conscious of the difference between being a tourist in a place and a mindfully aware observer. Of course I hope to be the latter, often not taking pictures at the tourist vicinities but rather, committing the details that comprise the environment to memory. I have over time developed a common set of approaches. I often begin by walking in a large circle, orienting myself to the general city location where I am staying. This gives me a chance to get a feel for the culture at the ground level, and to absorb cultural differences that are very subtle — architectural qualities— sidewalks, qualities of pavement, windows, doors, the height of entrances, the color or signage, the nature of how people move through spaces, street level cooking, the street odors, and above all the quality of light. The next step is to tackle the subway system. Each city has its own unique network, quality of signage, ease of access and feeling in the subway cars. For the taxis I get someone who is local to write for me the address on a slip of paper, or go to a nearby subway stop, or call a friend who can give verbal directions. The taxi gives a very different impression to the observer of the spaces it moves through contrasting with walking and the subway system— especially in the artificial light of evening.

Each country has its own peculiarities of differences in terms of taxis (i.e. choice of vehicle) and the behavior of taxi drivers. In each of the above works I was shooting video at a multiplicity of locations.

Of course the subtlety of cultural differences are gathered when working directly with people.

I have an assignment that I give my students (which comes from my own behavior)— notice things you would normally pass by and note them down or collect them in some manner relevant to your practice— this might be collecting quotes, video clips, taking photographs of qualities of light or architectural “moments”, writing poetic descriptions, recording sound, navigating the internet and marking sites, and/or collecting a box of peculiar objects. Thus, my work is an embodied version of this assignment germane to my own observations. The video I shoot is my “Book of Notice”. Of course one also never leaves home without their Moleskine or other portable notebooks of varying and/or multiple scales! One can also find differing notebooks that can be purchased locally (although Moleskines seem to be everywhere now).

I will now move through a set of works that fall within the rubric of this talk. The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers / Ex.Mech (Premier Exhibition of ICC, Tokyo; shot in Australia and Former Yugoslavia) was funded in part by the Australian Film Commission. I also won a video prize in the Lubijana video festival (in former Yugoslavia, now, Slovenia) this entailed the use of a Betacam camera and car for shooting in the local countryside. I shot a series of different images, without any clear idea of how I was to contextualize them in both Australia and in former Yugoslavia. In Yugoslavia I used a process I call “I ching driving”, after the Chinese Book of Changes (a chance book and analogue computer). I ching driving is driving randomly and finding the site as part of the process. Thus one is always looking for instances of interest in a non-hierarchical manner. Certainly all of these methodologies discussed above relate historically to the

Lettrist/Situationist notion of the Dérive – to the embodiment of psychogeographic processes.

Additionally, I began writing a series of sentences each with the same structure. I was interested in the surrealist idea of Exquisite Corpse— chance juxtapositions of images or texts that are derived by differing participants. I wrote what seems like hundreds of these sentences but then began to edit back, choosing specific words for their polyvalence. I ended up with 33 sentences, each with 10 linguistic slots. My notion was to make a form of audio/visual, computer driven sentence generator influenced by Oulipian traditions— in particular the combinatoric work of Raymond Queneau's – (*One Hundred Million Million Poems*). I also worked on the soundtrack for the work with ABC Radio in Sydney. I made many different 'one second loops' with little fragments of beats and different instruments edited into the loop. I then worked with the cellist Suhanya Raffel and layered cello on top of this with other keyboard of my own. Finally I added my voice to the 33 "movements" speaking the words. Thus, a 30 minute linear soundtrack was articulated. I then edited the images to this soundtrack carefully making 330 distinct audio/visual/textual modules, each exploring its own playful image/text/sound relationship.

I had studied at MIT at CAVS and the Film/Video Department and the following year worked in the Media Lab, where many of us started experimenting with "Elastic Movies" – through the early potentials of interactive laser disc (see also Luc Courchesne, Ellen Sebring and Glorianna Davenport to name a few). One could combine and recombine these modules driven by a small computer and interactive hypercard interface, a program designed to generate hypertext. After selecting a particular word or phrase one could send external commands to drive the laserdisc player playing back image/sound text modules – words/phrases and full sentences. This was long before quicktime was developed. Thus, now we are jumping to technological culture. The work took on many forms, having a multi-faceted life as a linear video, as a major time-based installation in the Sydney Biennial forming long linear sentences across a 50 foot wall, building and un-building sentences in a linear manner, and then moving on to Japan. The work also was made into an interactive CD Rom work for the series Art_In_Tact, published by the ZKM and much later shown in the "Future Cinema" show at the ZKM. The ICC show was the 1st show of the gallery/museum and was presented in a special space in the NTT building.

I began to work with a translator to articulate the Japanese Version of the work curated by Machiko Kusahara for NTT/ICC. I put stress on the word version. As one studies the differences inherent to each language, one finds that each language is 'of itself' and in a poetic/polyvalent work loaded with puns and word plays, one can only work toward making a "version" that functions in the same spirit as the original work. We used an ancient form of Japanese highly informed by a very traditional set of Chinese characters, and archaic grammatical form that fit with the modular nature of the interface. This included recording a new Japanese soundtrack with Japanese text spoken and editing Japanese characters into the image. I worked very hard to learn to speak the Japanese and we used digital editing to work through the timing. When the work was presented one could generate a sentence interactively and then choose "Japanese" or "English" enabling an instantaneous shift from one language to the other. While spending 6 weeks in Tokyo preparing the show, I shot the material for a new work entitled Passage Sets – again in the "Book of Notice" style. One memorable experience was in learning how to order soba noodles from a vending machine, at first ordering randomly to learn the different varieties of soup. One then hands the ticket to the cook and they hand back an incredible bowl of noodles and prawns (or other sometimes less pleasing bowls). Another was noticing the employment of vending machines in general in the city. One could get almost anything not to mention odd sexual items from these machines scattered across the city. The subway system is also well designed and I stood out as being a quite large Caucasian man. I experienced a very sad racist moment when I was banned from entering a sushi restaurant on my birthday – "No Gygen". Sometimes cultural experiences are not always positive, but this was a rare instance... I remember returning to Japan and a similar instance was happening when our guide told the proprietor of a tiny Japanese bar (just big enough for four or five people, that we were "OK". By the end of the night we all listening to Elvis Presley (his favorite) and dancing in the laneway outside of the bar (with him leading the sway).

Red Dice / Des Chiffré

Red Dice / Des Chiffré was commission by the National Gallery of Canada. The curator Jean Gagnon had seen my earlier work entitled **Passage Sets / One Pulls Pivots at the Tip Of The Tongue**, and realized that I was very much influenced by Mallarmé's *A Throw of the Dice will Never Annul Chance (UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS N'ABOLIRA LE HASARD*, 1897. The Gallery asked for me to work on a contemporary piece specifically addressing the original. I very much liked how Mallarmé's text flowed in different scales across many pages forming an analogue hypertext, driven by variable eye-movement. The text is still

available through Gallimard.

I worked with designer/artist Chris Ziegler to create an interface that would empower one to touch words with a “pen” and hear them spoken. I wrote an elaborate meta-text, a “line of flight” (after Deleuze and Guattari) from the original, exploring many associations springing from the original. The major thrust of the work was as follows: Mallarmé was to his social milieu as the computer and interface and its history was and/or is to mine. I chose to shoot many pre-cursors to the computer, e.g. player piano, power loom, as well as other earlier technologies including elements from a large old water driven mill. Germain Koh, then assistant curator (and talented artist) helped me set up the locations and a series of shoots were undertaken in and around Ontario, Canada. I composed music for the work with Piano by Thomas Moore and sax by Tony Wheeler. The generation of the text version was a true challenge, both developing a new translation of the Original text by Jean Gagnon, to the generation of a translation version of my meta-text. Like the project above, translating such complex texts is an impossibility and again we sought to find the spirit of the text through elaborate discussions of the poly-valence of each word choice. For the French version I worked extensively with translator Françoise Charron. This is perhaps best exemplified in the title *Dés Chiffré* which has multiple understandings in French that are quite parallel (yet subtly distinct from) the intentions of the title *Red Dice* e.g. *Red Dice*, *Read Dice*, *Red Ice*, *Re-dice*, etc.

We developed an interface where one could move back and forth from the English to the French version with the touch of a “Wacom” pen. This was perhaps one of the few vocal renditions that was truly in the spirit of the original text. One could click on the words in any order and hear the phrases spoken in French or English! As one touched the original words, small video icons would appear at the bottom of the page. One could then touch those and trigger a video segment with Seaman’s superimposed meta-text and music. Or one could move to a “recombinant” music generator, video generator and/or text generator. I still very much enjoy playing with the music generator — 144 loops of equal length that could be superimposed in many many differing combinations, by choice or chance. I often include randomizing functions in my works. One could play the linear video and thus generate a real time soundtrack with the remix engine. Of course this was early days for interactive video and the work functioned with Laserdiscs that searched quickly for appropriate segments or played linearly (or could be navigated) by the user of the system, along with the digital audio segments called up from memory. A beautiful version of the installation was later shown at the Langlois Foundation in Montreal where they lowered the vast wooden floor in the cinema, and with lovely projections, set up the interactive desk and digital writing apparatus. The two Canadian cultures of the French Canadian and the English functioned seamlessly in the creation and exploration of this work.

Com ↔ Space

Com ↔ Space short for communication/commerce space, was a collaboration with CHEONG, Yeong-woong, facilitated by the **Art Center Nabi** in Seoul Korea directed by Soh Yeong Roh. The work was a very large scale generative architectural work displayed in the SK building, across their elaborate network of screens both inside and outside of the building. The work was shot in and around Seoul over a two year period by Seaman, again with the **Book of Notice** style of collecting images. A poetic text was written and a Korean version of the text was generated. Yeong-woong, an incredible graphic designer produced a generative visual text system in both Korean and English, in a highly distinct, “concrete” poetic manner, across the many screens. Seaman composed a rhythmic soundtrack that was accessible in one part of the space. Here, the juxtaposition of the daily life of the Korean cityscape was injected into a highly corporate context, the inside and outside of the SK building. Large scale screens are becoming a part of daily life in Seoul (and many other large cities) and the potential for public art is ripe for being explored. Art Center Nabi saw this potential early on. The highlight here was seeing the work slowly moving across the 90 foot ceiling screen in the lobby of the building. I hope this kind of generative public artwork will become the more the norm in the next decade. There is still resistance to this because of the speed of technological change and the cost of ongoing replacement and up-keep. I believe these attitudes will change with the next generation, a group of people who see such technology as ubiquitous.

• A China of Many Senses (Travels with Xiaowen Chen, Wexner Video Residency, Generative work with Todd Berreth at Duke)

A China of Many Senses was shot of a few years of different trips to China. In each case the media artist Xiaowen Chen functioned as colleague and guide. China is a highly complex country economically, and the work explores many different economical and architectural backgrounds. One can see workers in traditional

garb juxtaposed with later edits of the teenager with cell phone in Shanghai. Again, the hope was to shoot the strongest images and avoid being a tourist. Of course some of the images have been seen elsewhere like the footage of the great wall, but an attempt was made to shoot a true diversity of situations— from cityscapes, to construction sites, to workers in rice fields and small street cooking scenes. A generative text, which has not as yet been made into a Chinese version was authored. A video residency at the Wexner Art Center in Ohio working with Paul Hill allowed me to focus on the detail of the work, recording the text modules, generating the video and modular video edits etc. I often do different versions of works and I have already shown the linear video with linear soundtrack at the Nasher Museum in a screening; made a version where the video functioned as a backdrop where I spoke and sung the text (my first live performance in about 30 years).

More recently I have developed a generative version which enfolds 3D architectural elements, the generative text, and generative soundtrack, working with the programmer and architect Todd Berreth (at Duke). We hope to premier this this fall but are still looking for the appropriate venue!

These are but a few of the cultural crossings that have been part of my work over the past 30 years including translation versions of work that have been manifested in many different languages including German, Slovakian, Hungarian, French, Japanese, Korean, (Australian [just kidding]) and Dutch...