

ADA Artist Interview 10/2020

BILL SEAMAN – transdisciplinary explorations of meaning production and the process of creativity

What are your current projects?

I tend to work on many different things simultaneously, shifting from one to the other. Currently I am in the final stages of two books: *From the Architecture of Ideas - The Life and Work of Ranulph Glanville — Cybernetician - Edited by Bill Seaman, Including Composing Composing, and A Long Conversation Between Bill Seaman and Ranulph Glanville. With Related Texts By Aartje Hulstein, Albert Müller, Søren Brier, Bernard Scott, Ted Krueger, and Others* (forthcoming Echoraum Editions, Vienna), and The second big book is *Chaos, Information, and Future Physics - The Seaman-Rossler Dialogue, Including Recorded Interviews with Otto E. Rossler and related texts by Mark Burgin, Peter Weibel, Siegfried Zielinski, and Susie Vrobel, as well as a comprehensive bibliography of Rossler's papers, concepts, and texts* (forthcoming World Scientific). I have been named book reviewer for the journal *Cybernetics & Human Knowing*. In terms of research I am working toward a new public release of a transdisciplinary search engine project related to Neosentience, AI, and the Future of Robotics – The Insight Engine 2.0. I am guessing this release will be sometime late next year... I have been without a programmer for 6 months due to a hiring freeze at Duke. I consider this work to be a new form of conceptual / digital art. Another new major project explores the creation of an elaborate installation out of the experimental Opera called the *Oper&* which John Supko and I initiated, commissioned by the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation.¹ John and I are also working on a new collaborative generative installation exploring image/music/text relations. I have been undertaking a number of new audio collaborations: with Craig Tattersall there are two new albums – *120 5x5*, *The Humble Seaman* (forthcoming Rottenman), and the album *Standing on the Precipice of Tears*, *The Seaman and the tattered Sail* (forthcoming Fluid Audio); an album with Nicola Fornasari, *SMLSND*, *XU* and *Seaman* (Fluid Audio, forthcoming); a work with Daniel Howe still untitled to be released next year on vinyl (Oscarson). Earlier this year I released an album with Rutger Zuydervelt (Machinefabriek) called *Movements of Dust*, a vinyl lp (Oscarson). I have also started a project with Michael Grigoni. One of the most exciting, very big projects is a digital print and drawing retrospective to be held in the Rubenstein Art Building and Galleries at Duke University. This will also include video screenings of past works. This is set for sometime in the next couple of years... I have undertaken a major re-make of my website which is also quite exciting, including many materials and past works that are probably unknown to people. This will roll out this winter at some point! On top of all of this I co-

¹ The *Oper&*, <https://vimeo.com/319379764>

head the Emergence Lab with John Supko and I am currently the Graduate Program Director of Computational Media, Arts and Cultures at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

What path led you to digital art and what fascinated you about it initially?

I studied art at RISD (sculpture and video) and then finished my undergrad at San Francisco Art Institute where I explored sculpture / installation / performance / video / and conceptual art. I had been doing sound performances where I composed tapes and sang live. I didn't like live performing so I gravitated toward producing video works exploring image, music, text relations (still analogue). My big shift was when I went back to school at MIT for my Master of Science in Visual Studies degree. I was working in multiple departments including the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, Film/Video, and the Visual Language Workshop. I was in a class in Film/Video called *Elastic Movies* which was run by Benjamin Bergery and Glorianna Davenport. We were exploring the beginnings of interactive cinema. This introduction to interactivity changed my life! I then got into the making of elaborate interactive installations – navigable, “recombinant” audio-visual poems. These were mixed digital and analogue – a computer controlled the navigation of a laserdisc (an analogue video form). Later these installations became fully digital. The next step from interactive video was to explore generative virtual environments – “Recombinant Poetics” was my term for this work.

How do you archive your own works? How do you think your works should be preserved?

This is a very interesting and difficult question. The Artintact series from ZKM – The Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, articulated a very nice way to make a miniature interactive catalogue related to a major work of mine – *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers* also called *ex.mech* for short. It enabled parallel/related interaction to that of the installation. Yet, I wasn't interested in art on-line at the time, or just CD-Roms and later DVDs, as the predominant form. I wanted a fully immersive space where the scale of the projected images enabled a special form of experiential content. You felt as if you were inside the work in the best renditions of the installations. I am still excited by your digital archive project because so much of this work gets lost. IMAI (Inter Media Art Institute)² had an entire conference on this and one of my works – Exchange Fields (with dancer/choreographer) Regina Van Berkel) was presented as an example of an elaborate installation that was remade to be fully digital as a way to preserve it. I often do many different kinds of versions of individual works – states of media I call this. The problem is that the computer, operating environments and supportive programming environments are often changing without being updated. Many early works were made with Macromedia Director --- when that platform died I basically lost the ability

² IMAI, <https://www.stiftung-imai.de/content/view/2/3/lang,en>

to show and/update works. I am currently working on updating/recreating a few different projects. Along with digital video this also goes for virtual environments.

How do you judge the interest in digital art in your surroundings, in your country?

It has been interesting to see a huge change over the last two decades. People are now much more comfortable with computers, projections, interactivity etc.

Do you think it has risen with the presence of new media technologies and social media in people's lives?

Many young people are tech-savvy. Yes, games, social media, smartphones, etc. have all contributed to a very new audience. What I don't see so much is museums re-thinking the collection of media works, in general given the interest in the viewing public.

Most digital artworks are created collaboratively. How many people are involved in your artworks (on average).

I always work with a programmer. At a certain stage I decided I would rather focus on the ideas and generate the media to populate a work. Instead of me doing the programming, I decided to seek out top programmers with very strong skill sets to work with, to bring my ideas to life. In terms of music I often work solo and/or collaborate with one other person along with finding multiple people to help me/us build libraries that I/we can work with in Ableton Live. I have had the chance to work with many incredibly talented instrumentalists. On occasion, I work with a professional video editor to help with the technology. I like doing my own video editing, and more recently have been doing the editing myself. I often create modules of video that are designed to be combined and recombined via differing forms of interactive or generative systems. The programmers I work with sometimes add elements of design in working out the final piece.

How would you describe the artistic development of your works, from both the collective and individual standpoint?

I often develop the idea for a work first. If it is an interactive video work I do all of the shooting, often searching for the right kinds of images by visiting many locations – this can mean a huge amount of travel. I often develop the generative texts to be used in the works. I work with Ableton live and literally “compose” by physically moving around pieces of recorded sound that I originate, often playing the piano or synth, and I also employ noises I record. I also

build libraries from the musicianship of others. I develop a strong logic for the interaction and map out the elaborate branching structures for a work. I communicate this and work with the programmer to bring everything together, test the system, and make changes. Some generative works take multiple “tweekings”. My latest work is in Recombinant Informatics, where I have been developing a transdisciplinary search engine as a new branch of conceptual art. In this kind of project, I work to develop the set of functionalities I want to explore and then work with one or more programmers to facilitate this functionality.

Why is transdisciplinary research such an important part of your artistic work? What do you hope to gain from it?

In transdisciplinary study, a series of focused research areas are bridged. Because no singular discipline, pairing of disciplines, and/or history of those disciplines can be used to elucidate the work that is arising, the term transdisciplinary is employed, suggesting that such study goes beyond any individual discipline or coupling of disciplines. Transdisciplinary research brings a set of fields of inquiry together in the service of emergent knowledge production, and this potentially leads to new forms of artistic creation.

What sparked your interest in Artificial Intelligence and the idea of the computer as a possible creative tool?

As I began to explore interactive video, I wanted there to be a kind of intelligence in how different modules of image, music and text could combine and recombine. In fact, I was interested in exploring what I call meta-meaning production, where the user/interactant could explore the meaning of the work arising and changing through their mindful interaction. I wrote a paper about this exploring what I called Re-embodied Intelligence – a kind of sub-branch of artificial intelligence. In re-embodied intelligence the system empowers the sensibility of the artist to be generated, and/or combined and recombined in a generative manner, always making the work new. The paper was titled *Emergent Constructions, Re-embodied Intelligence Within Recombinant Poetic Networks*. Bill Seaman 1998.

At this point, would you say that a computer can be creative or does it always need a human "partner"?

The computer can now embody the creative ideas of the artist. It can function a vehicle of the artist's creative ideas. In the future, I imagine computers will learn in a manner similar to that of the human, and will be able to make their own aesthetic choices, as well as have a meta-level awareness about the broad artistic context such work is happening within, or drawing from. Contemporary AI “learning systems” don't do this at the moment, as I understand it (although

things are quickly changing). I am interested in how the human can do what it does well in cooperation with what computers can do well, functioning in the service of creative production.

How would you define the human creative process?

I think people have different creative processes so I will just try to share my own in this instance. I think creativity often enables very disparate ideas and observations to be brought into a new context and be re-understood. Part of the process is just looking and listening to everything – so imagine that one does this their entire life, building up a huge reservoir of observations, associations, memories, behaviors, actions, processes, etc. This is perhaps a life of paying attention to what is meaningful and in what contexts things become meaningful. The brain/mind is a huge space and when we are working on things I think we access many of these kinds of past associations existing under the surface of thought. At any given moment, certain of these associations pop to the top. One can also build tools, be they analogue or digital, to help throw off habits, and explore new creative territories. I often enjoy mixing chance processes with editing – finding things through process. Play can also be important. Finding new relationalities that arise through play.

What interests you most in the interaction between humans and machines/computers? How do you try to capture this interaction in your artworks?

I find that computers have many roles in my life – communication; the aiding of thought processes; the accessing of texts, images, music, videos, and various digital environments; and the use of high level programs that enable and empower my creative thought. I see computers as open systems...if I can imagine a work then almost always it can be authored via computation. This is very different than any tool/machine that has ever existed in the past. My works often include processes where the interactant is empowered to generate new experiences via a process of interauthorship that are brought about through their interactions with many of the media elements and processes I have mentioned above. In my case I load the dice by providing very specific media elements that I author to be polysemic. The “composer” [Ranulph Glanville uses this term to replace the “observer”] becomes part of a second-order cybernetic process of circular causality, driving the system through their individual choices and navigations. I am interested in how such processes can enable one to become mindfully aware of how meaning is arising and changing through this navigation. So instead of writing about meaning production, I empower the exploration of meta-meaning processes that arise via self-directed engagement.

How would you describe your artistic process from working in the field of poetics and language and being a performer towards working in the field of artificial intelligence/computers?

I don't really separate them out. I am interested in how they can co-mingle, and become resonant through explorations that enable the investigation of multiple worlds simultaneously. I am interested in levels and qualities of abstraction, where computer code works hand in hand with media elements, and variable media worlds, to present experiences that are potentially new with each return.

What was there first – a scientific or an artistic interest/impulse?

I was an artist from an early age. At the same time, I always saw myself attending MIT one day, which ended up happening for my Master of Science in Visual Studies degree! This was right when the media Lab opened up.

Does your impulse to question the world and as an answer create art derive from a scientific or artistic viewpoint?

I always talk about a multi-perspective approach to knowledge production. This can include science, art, philosophy, etc. and this equally applies to art production, this multi-perspective approach.

How would you say your role as a musician plays into the creation of your artworks?

I love to make music. I have been interested in Image / Music / Text relations in all of my major works. It was only in the last 10 years that I allowed myself to do music on it's own... not functioning as part of a media art work. I also did experimental tape music in the beginning --- which then became layered in my first linear video works way back in 79 and some exciting early performances.

Thanks for this set of interesting questions!!