Interview with Tony Oursler, Stephen Vitiello, and Constance DeJong

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Constance DeJong = C.D.

L.C. This is not your first collaboration. What does collaboration provide, what does it offer you?

T.O. Well, if it's successful it's something that's beyond the sum of its parts. That's what I'm interested in, being able to do something that I couldn't really do myself and that surprises me in some way. Stephen and I have worked together ...

S.V. Almost ten years.

T.O. And Constance and I fifteen or so. In 1989 or '90 I gave up making a kind of single channel video tape I'd been making with a certain visual style that had to do with combining hand made props, drawings, and computer-based elements, together with video. It had become somewhat repetitive. I wanted to shock my way out of it and lose my identity a little bit.
Then I worked with Sonic Youth and Joe Gibbons, and that's where this project started. I have always thought of this project as a continuation of that kind of media work and a way to get out of the situation of one artist in his or her studio, working alone, in which they come up with stuff that just feeds off their own consciousness.

L.C. The project grows out of an earlier collaboration, a live performance held at Dia Center for the Arts in New York in May 1993, also called Fantastic Prayers. When the idea of making the CD ROM came up, how did each of you envision the transformation? Was it a new medium for each of you? How did it seem possible to move from a live performance to this medium?

S.V. At first it seemed to be essentially an archiving format, before it became clear that it was also an

interactive or a creative one: so it felt very natural to put the material into one place. It took the last couple of years before I could start to see it as a creative place, a place where I could create compositions in a series of little pieces, rather than thinking in terms of songs or a more linear sound track.

C.D. I don't think the performance per se was critical to the development of the CD ROM, or only in that it gave us a space to become very intense collaborators. Working with Dia, we felt free to think about other aspects of the material, about how the material might operate in other forms.
None of us is a single-form artist. I think we brought that to the collaboration. Not being single-form artists meant that everybody contributed their singular strengths: Stephen's music, my words, Tony's pictures. But all of us had previously worked with our single element in different forms. And so, when I say that it was natural that we extended the collaboration into CD ROM, it parallels our respective practices within our work. Also, during the time of the collaboration CD ROMs became more visible and more viable.

L.C. Was there a specific moment when you felt you switched from seeing it as an archival repository to seeing it as a creative form? Was there ever an epiphany?

T.O. A huge amount of time passed as we were working on it. We started out first thinking of having a record of the performance, maybe a video tape, or CD instead of a catalog.

C.D. Or even a book. A publication.

T.O. But the further we got into it, we realized that we had to change the form. We had this huge data base from the performance, which was also an installation that we had worked on for a number of years. As we started to tinker with it and saw what could happen in the CD ROM, we started adding new material.

S.V. It changed from a documentary approach to more of a proactive or a creative process.

C.D. There's no longer any documentation on the CD RON. For quite a long time there was a vestige of an idea that we would have archives in the CD ROM of some of the performance elements. But to make a primary form gradually became infinitely more attractive.

L.C. The original thematics have gone also. And whereas the performance was structured sequentially, in linear time, now there's no predetermined movement from one chapter or node to another.

S.V. It needed to be something that would hold all of our interests and talents, that was new to all of us.

L.C. Your CD ROM is unlike any other collaborative form I can think of, whether in dance, or film, or opera, where there always is a starting point and an end point; a story board, a script, some narrative. This doesn't have that. You never worked on any particular part thinking, for example, that it was the beginning. So it has this extraordinary ability to reorganize itself constantly, which means that it grows almost organically ...

C.D.... in the user's experience. It is user driven.

L.C. That raises the question of how these nodes or chapters came about, and when they took on an identity as pivotal elements.

S.V. Several years ago we spent two days together in a loft where I was house sitting. Tony covered a table with paper and we kept throwing up concepts and connections, each of us bringing his or her own interests, laying out ideas that weave into each other and weave out of each other. Everybody was sketching until some iced tea got poured on everything. That was the first sketch for the performance, and it seems that we've worked that way ever since.
For me, another amazing aspect about this collaboration is that with so many of these ideas I don't think any one of us could truly say "Oh, that was my idea". We've influenced each other so much that every one of us has got a piece of another's concept in mind, and in process.

L.C. When you say you were playing with concepts, were they philosophical concepts or were they thematic notions, such as a graveyard?

S.V. Both.

C.D. I don't want it to sound like smoke and mirrors but this material is thematically related, possibly in the same way that, as people get to know each other, they form ways of understanding and talking to each other in their own languages. This collaboration has that. Over a period of time we understood what the material was, what wasn't appropriate, and what was. Since the approach isn't linear, the piece doesn't require a beginning. And it ends when the user's attention stops.

L.C. Or when the medium is full, when, technically, there is no space left?

C.D. The beginning Is random. It starts at a different place each time. And there isn't a resolution, there's only a question of how long somebody uses it. Technically, there was an end that had to do with memory ...

T.O... the amount of memory that the disk could take at that specific moment in time. Themes sych as entropy developed early on as a way of thinking about the whole structure, about the way that systems try to rebuild themselves, or decay. That was one theme that seemed to run through it.

C.D. That comes mostly from Tony. My big thematic is the notion that the seemingly concrete world of either objects or spaces is completely infused with invisible narratives, with information and other realities. That theme and entropy, as Tony describes 1t, are not easily linked but they are linkable.

T.O. Another way that 1 think that we all looked at this piece was in terms of ingredients. Empathy Wheel, which turns out to be a really simple section, was done early on. It is the most game-like structure. It's almost like being in a country fair.
Each different node would have its own characteristics, which hopefully would be quite separate from the others. That's how they determined each other, that's the way the working process went.
Graveyard is really cinematic. It has a lot of pans, zooms, and hand-held camera action. That references the material, which has to do with a very macabre look at the media in general, and with the way that life-forces are sucked back and forth through media situations, and with how people's time is absorbed -what the overall intent of a kind of industrial media complex might be on the public. It's very occular, very lens oriented: there's a kind of resonance between the way that it's shot, the way that it's put together, and the material itself. Matatorium. which was a real struggle, has both a very architectural and an almost archaeological feel. In the end, it turned out to be probably the most digital, the most gamelike, and the most interactive node for a number of reasons.
As people move through it, there are various ways that they interact. We tried to make them very different, so that there was a kind of tension or excitement as you went through. So it was not just different types of information spread out that you accessed in the same way, we wanted each 'world' to have its own laws.

C.D. Specific to the Jacket section, and appearing nowhere else in the CO ROM, is the way that written language appears integrated with pictorial libraries. I think of this section as digital manuscript

illuminations. I had a larger visual role in that section than in some others. That's reflected in its very hand-made quality; it developed from things that I was doing on my kitchen table. [LAUGHS]
The notion that this jacket is full of invisible life - of stories - links it thematically to a screen like Hair, where strands of human hair are microscopically investigated so that we find a history or a calendar of the chemical and toxic intake of a particular strand of hair, and the story or event accompanying that chemistry. This idea is an old friend of mine. But it really belongs in the CD ROM form. It isn't a notion that I want to write as literature, in which I make strict sequential order on a page. This process is similar to thinking.

L.C. Meandering thought?

C.D. Mmm-hmm. Mmm-hmm.

T.O. Jacket is an extra bonus area, because it's made up of many little locations that are wildly different, where all sorts of different things happen, and in different ways. Plus it jumps back and forth in time. It just goes insanely from the molecular world to ...

C.D. ... to Marco Polo, to Queen Victoria, to ...

T.O. ... to the disco ...

S.V. It's similar with the use of sound in the Jacket node. I think about the character of sound in a scene as if it were a person, what would it be like, what would its role be in that scene? There are, maybe, forty-five little scores or little compositions to support those texts.
In another scene I might have been thinking about Tony's images. In another, I was more involved with bringing sound to foreground, like in an editorial. For example, in Natatorium there are probably two hundred individual sounds: they're all meant to be heard individually, or simultaneously. What I've learned from doing sound tracks for ten years is that we don't have a lot of language for sound that accompanies visual images or sound with language, but it does affect very much the way color is read, or the way a word is read.
Spaces are haunted by sound. And if it can be felt as physical vibration that comes out of the speakers, then it has its own way of touching you that's different from language or image. That's something that I learned in 1989 from my first experience of working with Tony. It was also my first collaboration, an installation called Crvpt Kraft. When Tony asked me to make four different sound tracks for four parts of the room, I

asked, "How do I sync them up?" And he said, "Oh, don't worry about it." We had different pieces running at different times and sometimes you'd hear everything at once and sometimes you heard only one thing. It was incredibly affecting to me because it made the music that much more three-dimensional.
That, too, is something I thought about: how full a presence does the sound need to have, or whether It is more like a trace memory? When do you want it to vibrate out of the screen, and when do you want to sense it ten minutes after you hear it?

C.D. This form allows us to be like a trio or a combo, where sometimes we're all playing the same melody and sometimes there's a soloist with the other two in the back. We do that in performance, too. It's a way that we have developed of working together, which says that words, pictures, and music are three equal elements.

S.V. They coexist. A three-ring circus. If it's successful, a three-ring piece is about how the dynamics give and take from each other, as does the content.

L.C. What kinds of interface did you have with technicians? Did that evolve over time?

T.O. We spent the first year looking at what could be done and what couldn't be done with this medium. During that time, for various reasons, we had a lot of delays. Then the technology changed. So, by the time we got to actually working with Steven Dean we were pretty much up to speed with what had been done elsewhere. He was a very fluid collaborator, keeping in touch with new developments in the medium, and explaining them to us, and also giving us ideas.
One of the ideas that we all agreed on was that we didn't want that slick pseudo-cyber look that's so prevalent now, we wanted our work to be more a compendium of different ways of making images. So, video is an important part of it, and photography, and other kinds of graphics. We needed to see how they translated, what actually worked, how video looked when it was loaded, whether it was degraded and so forth. We needed to know what particular properties CD ROMs had that other mediums didn't have.
Some of that I discovered for myself through magazines. For example, when we started working on this project, the VR node had just been invented. When I read about it, I could see how it had a lineage in magic lanterns: it had to do with a kind of 3D modeling and rendering of objects. It was very similar to the magic lantern found in, say, the work of Robert Breer. So I was able to play with that in a number of different ways and work it into some of our ideas. We wanted to take full advantage of what was available. I realize this piece will be outdated in two years or so, but at least we knew what could be done at the time and

pushed that as far as we possibly could.

C.D. But one notion that was always operating was to override the technology. So that, when you look at any image, you can't say, "They did that in Photoshop with a glitter filter," or whatever. We didn't want it to be dated in the way that special effects in video and other media quickly can be dated.
Tony's history of making dazzling effects out of low-tech means, like chewing gum and paper clips, was a part of this work, too, and essential to imprinting it with the artists' esthestic signature and not with the esthetics of the current technology. Steven Dean, who's very literate and up to date with this technology, has an arts background and understood that.

T.O. If I was going to make a film, the process would be already laid out. By contrast, even the process of producing a CD ROM is unknown. We brought to the process so-called assets: drawings, photographs, video, sound files, written language. To some degree we had to invent the process ourselves.

C.D. It was a slow and bumpy ride. On a lot of levels it was a distillation process.

T.O. You were more prepared than any of us, Stephen, because of the way that you work with sound, with samples, increments and so forth. But, for me, it was a rude awakening.

L.C. Did you think about who would use it, or was it more a question of how it would be used, or where it would be used?

C.D. Not to sound simple-minded, I wanted the work to be an adult experience. When it's not a documentary, CD ROM has been so often incorporated into children's games and adolescent entertainment. Unfortunately, distribution is going to be somewhat determined by the institutions that are, or are not, in place. Where does one find a CD ROM? Is it in the Virgin Megastore? Is it at Tower Records? Is it at your local bookstore? I'm not avoiding answering the question about who the audience is, rather, I think this work will produce an audience if it's made widely available.
We live in a media-driven, entertainment-driven, and technological society. This is just one more thing to do: one reads, buys a CD, rents a film, plays with a CD ROM ...

T.O. personally, I felt that this was such an experimental process that I really wasn't sure that anyone would want to see it when it was done. That changed three or four months ago.

I had a lot of questions about whether it was viable; I think that's also reflected in the way that the marketing has gone. Since we started this project, Voyager, which was the biggest distributor, has gone out of business and most of Silicon Valley has moved away from CD ROM, though I'm not really sure why. A lot of people call this a transitional medium. But there must be millions of computers now equipped with CD ROM ports. It's used for games, for rock-related things, and for reference. That's all there is at the moment. There's no hard entertainment, or soft entertainment, or anything in between.

I'm also aware of the fact that a transitional time for a medium could be a really good time to have something of great interest. Right now the industry is decimated. I think it's a good time to try to get things out, because there's a limitless attraction to anything having to do with entertainment or the arts in popular culture.

But, as Constance was suggesting, the question is how it gets out there. We all come out of a world of very slow distribution, of small record distribution, of independent press distribution.

One of the reasons I got into video art in the beginning was the idea that the works could go directly into people's houses. It could expand the site for art intake beyond museums and galleries right into people's homes, as cable TV or video distribution could. This seems like an opportunity to develop that. I'm really excited about it.

C.D. It's an interesting facet of the CD ROM format that it's an artform that is intrinsically intimate, immersive, and home-based. And affordable, also.

S.V. For me, the question of whether it's for an adult audience or not has to do with patience. When you think about things that are marketed for kids, there's a speed implied. It is assumed that they'll race through them. This project can be for anybody, but it demands some patience, some attention, when going through it. One of the reasons CD ROM has in part failed is that it got hyped too quickly, before it developed its own language and its own talents. Another hype around CD ROM, when it first came out, was that it would replace reading, it would replace music, it would replace books. I don't believe that at all.

C.D. What about the issue of resolution? Is that just a habit one brings to this from other art forms? It's an inappropriate question in the same way that some so-called difficult books require that you throw out your habituated way of reading: the writer teaches you, tells you how to read in a new way.

T.O. The viewer is a collaborator to a much larger degree than usual. There are certain parts that are almost Pavlovian, where you can click and then you receive something. And others where the movement of the

mouse, or on the screen, itself triggers things, and the viewer will intuit that certain things will happen. They are also based on time. For instance, if somebody doesn't move the mouse, by a certain amount of time it triggers something else. There isn't the traditional idea of clicking through, and opening doors, which is called an advent calendar kind of technology.

C.D. For the user this aspect is unknown and really interesting. People have their own history in relation to film, they know what their expectations are, their tastes, et cetera. CD ROM is a very unfamiliar experience and situation. So the definition of a fulfilling experience or a meaningful experience with this medium is quite unknown.

L.C. It involves a different range of terms from those that we would normally employ for more familiar media.

T.O. There's a rare time in the history of a medium, like when the first video portapak came out, that artists can be on the same playing field as people in any other parts of the industry. Whether it's Warner Brothers trying to make a CD ROM or it's us here, at Dia, trying to make a CD ROM, we're basically all working with the same material. Granted that they may have a bigger budget to grind more numbers, but they don't really have a better idea about how it can be done. There 1s a kind of open historical moment that I really like.

C.D. That moment of the level playing field without history is very real to us. So to jump in the pool and make a CD ROM isn't an expression of naivete or innocence, but of great optimism. Yet I'm not very interested in the predictions on CD ROM's future.

T.O. No, I'm just interested in where this one example is going to go.