

Press release, Berlin, August 2005

Dear Norman,

I hope you won't not be surprised that you won't learn anything new about your work this evening. There are famous colleagues and friends who are far more qualified than I to develop theories about your work or to write your biography.

However, I believe I will have achieved my goal for this evening if one or the other attendee of this prize ceremony was to become fascinated by your works or felt impelled afterwards to engage more intensively with New Media Art.

We are very happy that you could come to Berlin this evening to accept the d.velop art award. The [ddaa] is awarded to you, one of the most important artists in the area of digital art, for your life's work. Even though, however, this prize is awarded for the life's work of a person, we do hope that we may also expect one or the other fascinating piece from you in the future.

So far I have not had the privilege of meeting you, which is certainly not your fault since you have been omnipresent on the art scene over the last few decades. But I have made the acquaintance of some of your "machines"! From all sources and reports about conversations with you one gets the feeling that it is always a lasting experience to discuss art, science, machines or interfaces or life itself with you. And obviously it is always fun to spend time with you.

You will agree with me that all candidates are distinguished artists and have made exceptional contributions in the area of digital or new media art. But we had to make a decision. After some delightfully intensive discussions we were in the end unanimously agreed that in you, dear Norman, we had found a worthy laureate for this year's prize.

Why did the jury decide to award Norman T. White this year's prize? The best answers would definitely be provided by personal encounters with his works. It is a pity that we haven't had a chance to have such an encounter this evening. But perhaps you will have the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with one of Norman's machines at the 2009 exhibition in Bremen. We hope and wish that we can convince Norman to make this exhibition happen. For Norman believes that the formal setting provided by exhibition halls and

galleries is – well, let' say – suboptimal for the public, in that it makes it difficult to grasp the nature of works of art or the essential questions that lie behind them. He prefers people, who are not deliberately visiting an exhibition and have not prepared themselves accordingly, to encounter his works unexpectedly in public spaces.

The liberation of art from external and internal constraints is one of his motivations for the production of art. Or, to quote from Norman's own text "A short autobiography and credo": "My projects in the last ten years have therefore included strategies to bring art to all people of a given place, especially those people who would never enter a gallery willingly. Often, the most effective way to do this is by presenting the work in non-gallery settings, anonymously, without labels or explanations. In this way, the work, itself already released from strict control, is set loose into a social situation which is further open-ended."

Well, since we do not have the opportunity to let Norman's works speak for themselves, I can merely choose the theoretical approach in order to come closer to Norman's views on art.

Even though one might be tempted in this situation to divide the work of the artist into different phases, one must state that there are in Norman's case almost no self-contained phases of work. Art is for him a continuous process. You will discover that most of his machine-works of art exist in different versions, which he developed over the years around the "heart of the idea".

An in-depth look at recurrent themes that dominate his work and derive from fundamental questions or interests allow for a better approach to Norman's work.

First one finds his own description of his motivation to produce art (instead of e.g. pursuing scientific inquiry, even though he studied biology): "For me, Art comes alive only when it provides a framework for asking questions. Science provides that framework too, but 'good science' is too constrained for me. I would rather ask questions that simultaneously address a multitude of worlds... from living organisms to culture to confusion and rust. Only art can give me that generality."

Norman's method for gaining knowledge about the fundamental principles of our existence ("magnificently struggling toward understanding the fundamental principles of our existence") is his curiosity and his playful handling of matter. We can learn from him how satisfying it can be to keep the most important childhood talents alive as an artist: be curious and play.

Thus we are not surprised that Norman's works frequently revolve around questions of human perception: "I found myself continually returning to studies involved with perception."

Within the current theoretical discussion, this interdisciplinary field between art and science has received the label "performative science". Many theories and fields of inquiry contribute to it: neuronal brain research just as physical theories about basic principles, mathematical logic just as geometry, cybernetics, and chaos theories about non-linear systems, and so on. But Norman has "simply" – and that can be regarded as the operative term – built machines. His kinetic-electronic installations generate, e.g. on large arrangements of light bulbs, dynamic patterns of light that evince unpredictable and complex behaviour. However, these installations rely on the most basic principles of networked systems.

Theoreticians define these works as prototypes of the interactive New Media Art. We, as human observers, constitute part of the art work because we interact with the virtual states of being of the installation. The art work's states of being are no longer static, but rather dynamic processes. Human being and machine meld into a new unit through the multi-sensory surfaces, the notorious interfaces of the new interactive media art. One undergoes this process as an individual and as a singular experience. Norman explains this simply like this: "I liked the fact that no photograph or video could record the full essence of the piece; one had to be present with the work to fully appreciate its behaviour."

To be honest, I could not give a more straightforward and comprehensible definition of interactive New Media Installations.

A second defining theme of Norman's is his interest in all visible and invisible forces that can generate structure and patterns but also order and chaos out of a few fundamental principles: "I wanted to explore invisible forces using those same invisible forces."

The theoreticians would probably reconstruct his approach with complicated theories on, respectively, the evolution of artificial intelligence and artificial life. Naturally Norman knows these discourses very well for he himself has taken part in some conferences and exhibitions on the topic of "Artificial Life". In addition, some of his friends and students are intensively engaged in research and development on these topics. But I love Norman's plain description of what motivates him: "I love devices with 'a life of their own.'"

Long before the advent of the computer age – at the close of the sixties –, Norman was already experimenting with kinetic electronics. At this time, cybernetics and the non-linear dynamic systems of chaos theory were preoccupying the scientists. Some of you may know the Game of Life, a cellular automaton which the British mathematician John Horton Conway developed in 1970. However, Norman had already built his first cellular automaton First Tighten Up on the Drums in 1969. He arranged a few hundred of the earliest digital, integrated circuits into a machine that completely autonomously produced flashes of light, such as one can sometimes discern at the bottom of a swimming pool. He identified similarities between these flashes of light and cloud patterns behind the windows of aeroplanes or rain drops that are running down a window pane. As I already said, very often Norman was ahead of his time. His works First Tighten Up on the Drums (1969), Let Fly (1974), and Splish Splash 2 (1975) generate complex patterns with the help of interactive electrical circuits. Personally, I like Splish Splash 2. It is a thirteen-meter long wall made up of hundreds of light bulbs on which patterns emerge that are similar to those that arise by chance from rain drops falling on a smooth surface of water. I have heard that this work can still be seen in the foyer of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Vancouver. A milestone of New Media Art that can be discovered by those of you who ever visit Vancouver. All these installations show how complex pattern formation can emerge from “simple principles”. They are examples of Norman’s goals to create machines that have a “life of their own”.

For me, Norman is a space-time capsule. He is continuously testing the basic conditions surrounding him, collecting additional information, in order then to assemble everything into an ingenious work of art. In his works Norman developed through processes and transformations similar to those digital New Media Art itself underwent. No, to be correct, Norman was always at the forefront of the development. And he has the creative talent not only to adapt the current flow of ideas. His ideas and works initiate developments. Frequently, he is playing with tools and ideas long before others discover the field for themselves. And he loves the creative process of playing.

One of Norman’s realisations that has resonated with me as a theoretical physicist with a passion for chaos theory but particularly as a director of fifteen years of an Institute for New Media in Frankfurt is his disappointment over the limited and one-sided usage of the computer by artists of the New Media: “99.9% of art-work done on computers is limited to graphics.” I can only agree. But it is

not only the potential of the computer in the area of graphics that constitutes the soul of the new machine. The predominant usage of the computer in art as a generator of every type of high-definition pictures is a more than disappointing misapplication of the potential of this machine. The computer is not only another tool for art or a simple generator of images. "Even to this day, twenty years later, very few artists have discovered that the computer is far more than a tool", says Norman, and again I have to agree. He also provides the reasons: "rarely did artists realize that a computer's unique strength is its ability to play with such existentially-crucial forces as logic, neg-entropy, probability, introspection, and paradox."

Norman views computers as universal interfaces between human being and machine, which in his estimate have the potential to be stunningly powerful brains for robots. Computers do not limit creativity, as some believe, for "their functionality is open-ended". For Norman they are the intermediaries between his love for machines and his desire to comprehend human perception or the brain itself. This is probably why he prefers to call them "fun-house mirrors".

His group of works Facing Out Laying Low or FOLL, on which he already began working in 1977 with his first Motorola D-1 computer, is a wonderful example of Norman's way of thinking. FOLL is an interactive robot. It continuously analyses its environment (or more precisely, the light patterns in the space surrounding it) from a fixed point in space and then responds to activities it finds "interesting" with a multiplicity of acoustic answers. Its behaviour is unpredictable and thus a singular experience. Theoreticians would describe the FOLL machine as an early example of the modern concept of "embodiment". And moreover, as I can't stress often enough, the creation of art is a process. In the meantime, FOLL has gone through six major hardware/software revisions!

After the appearance of telecommunications networks in the eighties – but long before the advent of the internet – Norman created some early tele-presence installations. Hearsay (1985) was a telecommunications experiment based on that children's game during which a secret message is whispered by one person to another until it arrives again at its point of origin. Hearsay sends a message around the world via a global computer network within twenty-four hours, more or less following the pathway of the sun. Every station translated the message and sent it on. Telephonic Arm Wrestling (1986) allowed one to experience in real time arm wrestling with other participants at other locations. Many people regard this installation as the perhaps most important piece of pioneering work for the art of network- and remote-kinaesthetics.

Norman was very unhappy with the increasing emphasis digital art placed on virtuality, and therefore he, the craftsman of artificial machines, switched to real hardware: "I like the sound of gnashing gears and clanking parts!" Thus his machines acquired engines, transmissions, and gear boxes. For instance, Funky Isn't Junky from 1982 consists mainly of wood, and his probably most famous machine, The Helpless Robot (1987-1996), has a wooden skin and an iron skeleton. It has neither engines nor wheels, but perhaps it is precisely because of this that it is one of Norman's most ingenious apparatuses for questioning the techniques for the automated generation of knowledge. The machine, using a synthetic voice, encourages visitors to move it the way it "loves it". (The robot has to be carried around by the observers.) In this process the machine tries to gauge and predict human behaviour. And of course the Helpless Robot too is a continuing process with regular modifications of soft- and hardware.

In 1988, Norman began a sequence of public competition and destruction projects with the cooperative venture Them Fuckin' Robots.

For Them Fuckin' Robots the artist Laura Kikaula and Norman designed and built separately, without communicating with each other, an electro-mechanical sex machine. They only specified the size of the significant organs involved. In order to image what happened when the two machines encountered each other in coram publico, one simply has to hear Norman's own description: "The male machine responds to the magnetic fields generated by the female organ, thereby increasing its rate of breathing and moving its limbs, simultaneously charging a capacitor to strobing 'orgasm'. The female machine, on the other hand, is a diverse assemblage including a boiling kettle, a squirting oil pump, a twitching sewing machine treadle, and huge solenoid on a fur-covered board -- all hanging from an old bedspring and energized by an electronic power sequencer." Oh, how it would have liked to have been there for that encounter!

"I was discovering the beauty of wear and break-down. It was another aspect of loosening control", Norman states as the first reason for inventing the public battles between robots. "Rawbotics" and the "Sumo Robot Challenges", which take place annually at the Ontario College of Art & Design, are fascinating events, and they are pure fun: "One of the ways in which my friends, my students, and I mix computer software, electronics, and mechanics -- and have fun doing it -- is building

machines which bash, taunt, and insult each other". The second reason for the invention of the public robot events is without doubt Norman's conviction that "Art functions best, and is most needed, outside of galleries and museums." Art should free itself from its industrialised context, we already heard about that at the beginning.

This last quote articulates an argument that is surely not the least significant when it comes to why Norman T. White should receive the d.velop digital art award 2007/2008. Over and above his pathbreaking works of art, Norman is one of the most influential godfathers of New Media Art. For more than twenty-five years, he generously shared his thoughts and ideas as a teacher with a large number of students. Some became famous artists in their own right. Many became his friends. It is an open secret that his annual parties in NorMill are legendary meetings of the international art scene. I am sure that the prize money of the d.velop digital art award will ensure that drink and good cheer will surely not be in short supply at the next party.

Congratulations, Norman!