Game Theory:
Conversations with Pierre Tremblay, 2024

Ulrike Balke

Art Is Like a Game:

I always take photos, write notes, make videos—family, documents, memories, anything—in no particular order—the flow of life. Once in a while I look back at these materials, and that's where my projects start.

In 1988 I bought my first video camera and decided to use it as a still camera, extracting images from video, searching for the one image to use as a portrait. I began to play with these images and save the variations. I ended up with a lot of images, sequences; I decided to add sound, and focus on artists.

The first portraits are from the late nineties. I now have more than a hundred, mostly in French or English, and the project is still evolving. At some point I started to work on different graphic strategies, different games.

Soundbites, a quote... A game of playing as if I had no time.

Presentation of the work went from single channel to multichannel, and then interactive forms. I added text; the portraits got longer, at first a few minutes, then more extensive.

Installation at InterAccess

*This film is based on my exhibition **ART IS LIKE A GAME**, shown at InterAccess last June. The installation integrated 360° video projection and multiple CRT televisions to create many perspectives on art practice.*

The project is anchored in Marcel Duchamp's quote, "Art is a game between all people of all periods," and Michael Snow's response, "Art is like a game; every time I feel like I'm going to lose, I change the rules."

The exhibition and the film underline the ritual of art making, much like a game that operates within a set of rules that can be both altered and broken. Endless possibilities arise when the rules of the game are continuously reimagined.

While working, I continuously addressed the challenge of seeing multiple moments at once. My interest in moving images and sound questions the world in flux, and how we see and perceive.

*Making portraits has been an important part of my practice and this film is a 40-year retrospective of my work on portraits through three projects. The first one, which I called **VOYAGE**, was done in 1984 when I was a student here at Image Arts. I was interested in presenting short sequences for each subject.*

I was working with slides and decided to keep the slide mounts as a graphic element. I had access to an 8X10 enlarger to make prints here at school; I also did an internship where I had access to a Marron-Carrel camera—a pin register camera—and I could process, duplicate and work with lithography films (black and white, high contrast, positive and negative) to multi-expose my images. So that's how the portraits started.

from *VOYAGE*

I went from asking artists for one sentence to making even longer works about artists: Michael Snow, Bruce Elder, David Rokeby... there were also portraits of Louise Bourgeois, Chuck Close, Françoise Sullivan and recently Max Dean. And many more.

*After the **Portraits in a Sentence** project, I initiated the **Art Walk** series—me taking a walk with an artist, each of us filming and talking as we go along. I wanted to offer my students my own alternative to Art 21.*

The films I made did end up at FIFA, etc., but fundamentally they were part of my effort to share different and hopefully inspiring perspectives on creation with my students. From one angle, you could see this whole project as me doing my part in an ongoing exchange of ideas with my students.

but my medium has always been the digital
and experimenting with media

from *A Walk with Jake Elwes*

This latest film is finally a tribute to all the artists I have talked to. The challenge was not so much to make a documentary about the exhibition in June but to change the rules—to place the artists in conversation in a new work—even though InterAccess was the setting.

Throughout the exhibition at InterAccess, Pierre filmed continuously, observing and recording audience responses. He also offered GoPro cameras to exhibition visitors and wove their footage together with his own. Later, through at least five versions, the film took shape as both a document of the installation and a meditation on the possibilities of art practice, as expressed by his forty-odd subjects.

Stan Brakhage

The film is bursting with ideas. Some are conveyed via sound bites as short as ten seconds, some are outlined in paragraphs; some arise from more extended conversations, up to nearly two minutes long.

As each artist speaks, the viewer's sense of what's possible continues to grow: this gives the film a cumulative power that is easy to appreciate yet hard to define. In part, this power derives from Pierre's careful editing: in addition to the figures mentioned earlier, the words of artists such as Doris McCarthy, Gilles Morissette, James Tenney, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas echo and reinforce each other, but never compete for attention.

Despite its apparent spontaneity, the film also has a rough chronology, in general progressing from earlier to more recent projects. It also has an intuitive thematic structure, with three principal areas of focus.

The first of these has to do with aspirations and intentions: with what you make and why, and how you scale your work.

Samantha Rajasingham begins by expanding on the idea that *art is like a game:*

It's true – art is really just your energy; whatever you make is your energy becoming whole, becoming concrete, or becoming something for a moment. When you make something, it moves through you... [it's] the imprint of who you are.

Max Dean adds:
One of the things that's interesting about making artwork and doing something like this is that you're beyond criticism, that there is really no good or bad, it's all subjective. I can make something, and the metric for its approval or acceptance is really all relative. So I'm safe... And one of the reasons I make art is it's one of the few places on the planet —and in my brain—that I feel safe...

Francoise Sullivan's statement—*I want to do something very intense with almost nothing*—is echoed by **Sara Angelucci:**
First, I think I was trying to tell a story, and then I was trying to write a paragraph, and then trying to write a sentence... And now, I think I'm just trying to find a word.

And a few minutes later, **Ginette Legaré** explains,
I actually work starting from a detail... [the work] starts and creates meaning from nothing, not much... I manage to reflect on various things which were said, or which were not said... Often the pencils are very long, but the erasers are finished... I find that adorable.

Ginette Legaré

The second section, more complex in texture, shifts its emphasis towards means and materials, particularly in relation to the present art-making environment.

Walking with Pierre outside Paris, **Magali Desbazeille** is very frank about this issue:
> I did paint, metal, sculpture, photography, video. And then, I found myself on leaving the Beaux-Arts in '94, to be already totally obsolete technologically, since I just knew how to do things on magnetic tapes, and I didn't know computers, I almost never used a computer... [This changed] when I went to Le Fresnoy... [computers enabled] a relationship to the body, to live spectacle in the presence of the public... And that I liked very much.

On another walk with Pierre (in the cemetery at Bergmanstrasse in Berlin), software developer and digital artist **Jonas Ersland** spoke about using digital tools to examine the invisible, or unseen traces:
> I had been working a little bit with fingerprints as an experiment for a school project many years ago, and then of course the coronavirus happened. And I thought it was interesting to look at this thing that was all around us, but still so invisible. And that was the moment when I started to think it would be interesting to work with the fingerprint technique again because that's really what it does: it reveals a story which is so around us, but still so hidden.

Immediately following Ersland is the research artist and theoretician **Don Foresta:**
> All my work is based on the idea that the paradigm of Western Civilization has radically changed, from the machine model to the interactive network modal. The interactive network and its operational diagram, and its geometry, is now the geometry of our imagination... and when I talk about the geometry of the interactive network, implicitly I mean that this geometry is fractal.

from the machine model to the interactive network model.
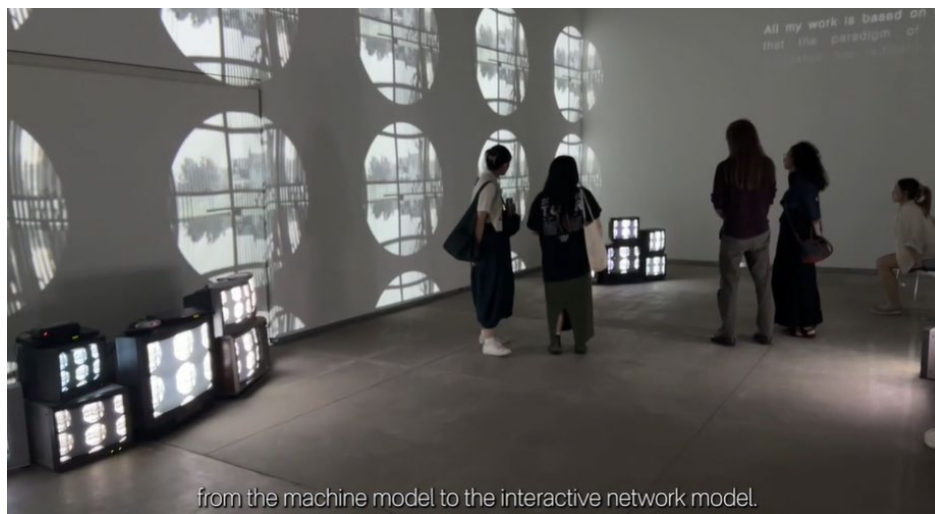
Don Foresta

The film also has an elegiac element: its voices include those of James Tenney, Doug Clark, Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, and Michael Snow, and the defiant presence of Louise Bourgeois; most of these artists appear in the final section, which is simultaneously the emotional center of the work and a more probing investigation of the role of the artist in the larger world.

Doug Clark

On a walk through Hampstead Heath, outside London, **Jake Elwes** spoke about using digital platforms to create different paths for social engagement:

My medium has always been the digital and experimenting with media; I slowly became more interested in how I could actually move beyond software and start to write my own tools. And then I became much more interested in artificial intelligence and machine learning, and more and more my research around AI has moved away from the much colder sorts of conceptual art and metaphysical questions... and moved more towards issues around bias and representation.

So I wanted to work with my friends and my community of drag kings and drag queens and people who don't fit into binary genders, and inject that into this standardized dataset. And what it does is it moves all of the weights in this neural network into a state of otherness, and it disrupts the dataset. If you think about deepfakes, it's so often fake news, or even really dark stuff. And what we wanted to do was actually work with our community... It's fun, it actually engages people...

Walking along the East Don River in Old Thornhill, **Maralynn Cherry** positions her work between the consciousness of the individual and a larger consciousness of nature:

> *I always love these vines, and everything coming down... and this is where the morphology of all my thought life gets so affected... And the morphology of form [is the same as that] of thought forms. And so, in those gestures, they're like nerve endings... like all the dendrites in the trees... I get into this whole sense of back and forth between my body and the rhythms out here, and the constancy of the relationships between the interior, the exterior—to me, they're all enmeshed together... I suddenly come to a realization, and everything shifts for me.*

Maralynn Cherry

Appropriately enough, **Michael Snow** has the last word, quoting Paul Valery:

> *To look is to forget the names of the things you are looking at.*

It's a great rejoinder to Louise Bourgeois's question ("Who is that, Michael Snow?"), and a beautiful way to end this complex and illuminating film.

Probably this is the only way the film could end—as Pierre himself commented while trying to summarize the film's content: "It's a bit of a hybrid."

Notes:

The exhibition of *Art Is Like a Game* took place at InterAccess, on Dupont Street in Toronto, from June 19-22, 2024:
https://interaccess.org/event/2024/art-game-pierre-tremblay

The film was screened at the School of Image Arts, Toronto Metropolitan University, on October 23, 2024, as part of Pierre's report on his sabbatical activities:
https://www.torontomu.ca/the-creative-school/news-events/news/2024/07/pierre-tremblay-exhibits--art-is-like-a-game--at-interaccess-gal/

More work by Pierre Tremblay can be seen at:
Home | Pierre Tremblay

The trailer for *Art Is Like a Game* is posted at:
art is like a game - trailer on Vimeo

For their work on the exhibition and the film, Pierre Tremblay expressed his thanks to curator Minwoo Lee, visual lead Julia Zolota, composer Alex Geddie, story editors Simone Estrin and Adrian Pop, and cinematographer Yuetong Liu. Additional footage was contributed by James McCrorie and Hongen Nar.