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Interview with artists Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher by Kemper Museum curator Christopher Cook

November 7, 2008–January 11, 2009

Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher: Reel to Reel propels viewers into a multisensory experience through a matrix of experimental sounds, live video sequences, and electromechanical sculptures. Once activated, each kinetic device generates animated video or musical compositions that are synthesized in real time to create a poetic, cinematic experience. Texas-based artists Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher bridge high- and low-tech instruments—handmade kinetic sculptures and props, vinyl records, analog electronics, and video sequencing software—to create an enveloping installation that is both captivating and theatrical, advancing dialogue surrounding the histories of film, music, and human/technology interfaces.

Christopher Cook, curator of the Kemper Museum, conducted the following interview with Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher via email September 3–21, 2008.

Christopher Cook: The Shore-Fisher team, so to speak, has been in existence since 2002. Since then, you have collaborated on numerous projects and have exhibited your work in solo and group exhibitions throughout the country. When did you both first meet and how did you decide to work together?

Jeff Shore: Jon and I grew up together. Our friendship was always driven by a need to collaborate on projects, especially art. During high school, we mostly created music together. We always envisioned a visual art and music connection. It wasn't until after our undergraduate degrees and spending some years apart that we started the projects again. In 1993 I was back in Houston and Jon was in Chicago in his doctoral program. That summer I flew up to visit and we spent a week creating and documenting an automated sound-producing sculpture. That was the beginning of the conversation that has continued to drive our work. Later that year I returned and we shot a short video together. ... In 1996, Jon provided me with recordings of improvised blues guitar, which I included in an installation at Project Row Houses in Houston during the show *Blues and the Abstract Truth*.

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Jon Fisher: In 1998, I started working at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I learned a lot about electronics from [research specialist] Ed Bennett and a lot about computer programming by being asked to teach it without really having any experience. Those two new skills, as well as a need to take a break from the “school of music” mentality, allowed and inspired me to contribute significantly to the installations until around 2002, which is when we sort of “officially” consider the pieces equal partnerships.

CC: How would you define your individual roles in this collaborative process?

JF: Mostly what you see, particularly any of the scale model work, is made by Jeff, with the exception of the automated musical instruments, which usually I design and make and Jeff then integrates them into the rest of the work. I am responsible for any sound components and all of the electronics and programming that run the pieces. However, the heart of the collaboration is really more about what happens before we make a new piece and what happens just as we are finishing it. ... Ideas for new pieces often come from our conversations long before anything is made. In those conversations, we are free to cross over into the other's territory, so I may have ideas about a new scene to experiment with, Jeff may have ideas about ways to incorporate sound that we haven't tried yet, etc. ... Then, when we are finishing a piece, particularly in the large-scale installations, we go through a period of making all the final decisions in which we both work to get everything right.

CC: I first experienced *Reel to Reel* at Clementine Gallery in New York, where it debuted in fall 2007. After entering the dimly illuminated space, I was mesmerized by a network of intricately designed kinetic sculptures mounted to the gallery walls and floor. [Fashioned from a litany of wires, motors, bulbs, surveillance cameras, and other electronic gizmos, each inventive device emitted a cacophony of curious sounds, tiny movements, and colored lights.] Could you discuss the various materials and equipment you used to construct them, and how, in general, each piece operates?

JS:*Reel to Reel* is a network of six wall-based electromechanical installations. Four of them generate live video sequences. Three of these pieces have hand-built scale models hidden within a wood or metal enclosure. And one has exposed, textured patterns glued to sheet metal, which is wrapped around a 55-gallon drum. In total, fourteen cameras create views within these four pieces. Some of the cameras are attached to motorized booms which push or pull them through a scene. Other cameras are fixed and are placed to watch motorized movements of the sets themselves. The transitions between the individual cameras are created by a digital crossfader. Cuts from camera to camera and scene to scene are directly linked to the production of the soundtrack.

JF: In each of the sculptures, there is a microcontroller acting as an electronic "brain" for that piece. The microcontroller has the ability to turn on and off the various motors and lights within the sculpture. It also has the ability to communicate with a central computer that is running the whole show. ... The computer is then responsible for orchestrating the action of all of the sculptures, controlling the crossfading of the scenes between each sculpture, controlling the lighting in the gallery, and generating in real time the soundtrack that is accompanying the video output of the piece.

CC: The video output that is projected onto the gallery wall is reminiscent of experimental Surrealist film, Hitchcockian film noir, and, at times, the uncomfortable scenes of alienation in paintings by George Tooker [b. 1920] and Edward Hopper [1882–1967]. The imagery effortlessly transports viewers into an unpopulated dreamscape of miniature domestic interiors and simulated "natural" phenomena, such as passing clouds or sunsets. One possible reading of this narrative is as a commentary on the impact of technology on humanity—how our perception of time, space, and place is changing and how we are increasingly displaced from reality and from each other.

JS: That would be one interpretation. The fact that our devices are able to create an experience is the point. We do hope that the convincing combination of our disciplines is interesting and has meaning. We also realize that the viewer will have his/her own interpretation of our work and give it meaning within his/her own frame of reference. I think a successful piece is one that is ambiguous but seems specific while being experienced.

When it comes down to it, I'm really limited in what I can depict. Objects and architecture are easy, but organic movement is tricky. ... Really the saving factor has been how we emulate film. The viewer is already programmed with certain expectations. We play into that. Through the sequencing of music and image we hopefully create a unique—but familiar—experience.

JF: ... As a musician, I have always been comfortable with an ambiguous narrative, music being as ambiguous as it gets in terms of its interpretation or meaning. The narrative that we can construct is greatly limited by circumstances, as Jeff mentions, and these limitations give us a very specific realm in which to work.

Regarding the absence of people, an interesting moment in *Reel to Reel* occurs when the miniature reel to reel comes alive in the midpoint of the sequence of scenes. It “plays” a selection from an archive of my old four-track recordings: pop-oriented music with singing, usually. For a minute or so, this musical style jars us out of the unpopulated dreamscape and puts us back in the world of people, though only through a recording and an anonymous singer. Just as quickly, the recording ends and we are back to the dreamscape.

CC: The individual parts orchestrate an immersive environment that, in many ways, is quite theatrical. While the sculptures perform their individual roles in creating the audio and video components of the projected film, viewers also perform as they meander back and forth from screen to mechanical instrument to determine which moving part or flashing light is creating the visual or aural effect. How would you define the type of atmosphere and experience you are trying to create for the viewer/participant?

JS: “Participatory” is a good word, as the viewer is a key component. And “performative” a good word for our real-time installations. To the passive viewer, our pieces are hopefully playful and inviting, but for the curious participant, our immersive environments have rewards for digging deeper. We intentionally leave a trail of evidence. We expose some of our technologies to bring the viewer into our realm of problem solving.

JF: For *Reel to Reel*, I think the film analogy is a good starting point, but what we want to do is take you inside the process of the creation—the performance of the film. ... In terms of the sound, I intended to create something that sounds like a film score, which creates and reinforces the atmosphere of the imagery. To that end, I use some orchestral sample libraries that are often employed in film scores. But the music is being produced in real time by the computer, it isn't pre-composed or –recorded, which gives it a slightly artificial characteristic that I hope will make the viewer question exactly what it is and how it is produced. More importantly, two of the sculptures are automated musical instruments, one a hammered string instrument and the other a set of homemade record players.

Both are controlled by the main computer and contribute to the soundtrack. By having some of the instruments as part of the environment and some of the instruments “invisible” (the sampled sounds), the line between being inside and outside the process is blurred. ...

CC: Experiencing *Reel to Reel* is like being in a mechanical apparatus (a finely tuned watch, for instance) and observing how it works from the inside. One senses a constant dialogue between the mechanical and the electronic—a dialectic of instability and precision, chaos and order. Do you consider chance an integral component of this piece and/or your working method?

JF: At the level of detail, chance is an integral part of the work. The algorithms generating the music heavily rely on computer-generated random numbers, though these are used in very tightly controlled windows of randomness. The resulting music is always the same in general mood for each activation of the piece, though the details, the actual chords, pitches, rhythms, etc., differ each time. The use of the turntables produces a similar effect ... never the same twice, though always the same kind of sound. Of the mechanical sculptures, the one that relies on chance—better described as chaotic motion in this case—is the sky scene. Gravel is being vibrated above a miniature scene to produce cloud patterns moving across the sky. The movement of the gravel is very organic, complex, and unpredictable. The music is also responding to the movement of the gravel through a set of sensors monitoring the image, so that we get changes in the music that are directly caused by the unpredictable movement of the “clouds.”

CC: Similar to traditional cinematic story telling, the projected imagery and accompanying music seem to be stitched together in a cohesive, purposeful way to suggest a linear narrative. Why does *Reel to Reel* follow this narrative structure?

JF: The video sequence that *Reel to Reel* produces is activated with the press of a button and lasts about ten minutes from beginning to end. When inactive, each of the wall installations is lit traditionally. When the button is pressed and the sequence started, the gallery lighting fades and the space is transformed by the colored lighting controlled by *Reel to Reel*. Similarly, when the sequence ends, the space is then transformed back into a traditional gallery setting. By manipulating the space itself like this, I think we clearly define and differentiate the *Reel to Reel* “world” from the everyday gallery setting and attempt to pull the viewer into that world. ... It allows the piece to be born out of a context of silence in much the way that we traditionally think of a musical performance: the lights go down, performers come out, and the show starts.

Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher: Reel to Reel is co-organized by the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, and the Weatherspoon Art Museum at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Following its presentation at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art (November 7, 2008–January 11, 2009), *Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher: Reel to Reel* travels to the Weatherspoon Art Museum (February 1–April 12, 2009).

Born in 1969 in Richmond, Indiana, Jeff Shore currently lives and works in Houston, Texas. He holds a BFA in painting and drawing from the University of

North Texas, Denton. Born in 1969 in Texas City, Texas, Jon Fisher currently lives and works in Dripping Springs, Texas. He studied abroad at the University of Surrey, Guilford, England, and received a BM in music composition from the University of North Texas, Denton, and an MM and DM in music composition at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. Shore and Fisher have had their collaborative works featured in solo exhibitions at Arthouse, Austin, Texas; Angstrom Gallery, Dallas; Clementine Gallery, New York, and most recently at McClain Gallery, Houston. They have also participated in numerous group exhibitions, including *Constructions & Architecture*, The Dallas Center for Contemporary Art, Dallas, and *Texas Prime*, DiverseWorks, Houston. *Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher: Reel to Reel* is Shore and Fisher's first solo museum exhibition.