Toni Dove on technology as subject matter

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2935 words.

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This interview is part of a Pioneer Works series that includes:

Regine Basha on curating, zig-zagging, and taking time to reflect

Dustin Yellin on building new systems

Many of our conversations for The Creative Independent, often regardless of genre, circle back to people talking about how technology informs what they do and what they make. You've been engaging in this type of conversation for decades now.

It's interesting because when I first started doing this kind of work, which is now about 20 years ago, I did one of the first narrative virtual reality pieces of the Banff Centre for the Arts. That's what started me working with interactivity, although I had already been working with big three-dimensional screen systems and things. I guess I've been trying to pull the movie off the wall into the room with you, so to speak, since I first started working.

At that point in the early '90s when I started doing interactive installations, there was a big group of people doing this kind of work. Almost none of them are doing it anymore, and some of it is because there's no real business model for it. It's hard to raise the money for this kind of work because it doesn't really fit into the context of the art world—having operating systems that can become obsolete, that require maintenance, etc. The investment economy of the art world doesn't really lend itself to this. This kind of art is less like a Rembrandt than it is like a limited-edition Porsche.

It was interesting to witness that point at which people were starting to go off in different directions, the tech world Balkanized, and some people went to the art world and started doing more object-oriented things involving more limited technology. People went into the theater world. Some people went towards the arts electronic arena, which is primarily technology driven work. Technology is the subject matter of my work. The whole history of my work has been looking at the evolutions of consumer culture, and its relationships to technology, starting with the industrial revolution and going forward. I've always liked to make things and I'm fascinated with the way things work. I've always been like that. My father was like that, too, he was a tinkerer who used to build things. I love automatons. I think of myself as a visual novelist who builds human-operated instruments to tell stories.

You've been preparing for a retrospective of your work. How does it feel to revisit early pieces, many of which involve what is now somewhat obsolete technology, and make them work again?

It was a challenge. A piece from the late '90s, *Artificial Changelings*, the one about the kleptomaniac, was originally housed in three large road cases and weighed 900 pounds. It involved all of these laserdisc players.

Now it fits in a small box. It was interesting to update it because in the process of doing that, importing it to a laptop, most of the things that had been hardware became software, but it's still the same piece. It has the same sound, and the same basic video material. I didn't transform it very much.

It doesn't feel like it changes the meaning of the piece?

It didn't feel like it changed the meaning in the piece profoundly, but it changed something about the quality of the piece in some way. I've been talking to some people at Cinema Studies up at NYU about it because they're archiving my older pieces. I would love to protect, and save, and archive a version of it that was in its original form.

I feel like part of the interest for me in working with all these emerging technologies is about having this hands-on relationship to these materials that are transforming the world that I live in while I'm living in it. Somehow when I'm actively working with them and using them, sometimes it feels like a contribution, sometimes it just feels like a way of understanding. It's also about being able to bring a critical dimension to the way I think about how they operate and what they're for, and what embedded motivations they might have.

Technology is kind of meaningless in an artistic context if it's not in service of a good idea. There seems to be a lot of digital and technology-based art that is about spectacle and little else.

I call those kinds of pieces "digital doilies." It's like, "Isn't this cool? We've learned how to do this production. We've got all these fun tools, and these great toys!" There's definitely a fusion of art, design, and technology happening now that constitutes a new landscape. I understand why a lot of people don't want to be part of the "art" world, and just spend their lives running around trying to make tchotchkes for rich people. I also understand why some people using these technologies instead want to be more involved in figuring out how to clear plastic out of the ocean. They want to tackle more serious problems. I like that and I respect it.



You typically make these large, complicated interactive pieces involving robotics, film projections, and three-dimensional design. How does the process usually evolve for you? Is it like, "This is an idea I'd like to explore, and maybe theses are the new tools that could help me explore it?"

You do develop certain kinds of work processes as you go along. It's always different. You can't want to write a song *and* build the piano every time. Something usually happens where I'm just finishing a piece and there's a new piece that's already started to bubble up in my mind. As it starts to happen, there's usually a good, healthy crossfade, where I'm starting to move out of one headspace and into something new.

I feel like there's a lot of work in this realm—what I'd call technology-based art, for lack of a better term—that doesn't have a narrative.

No, it doesn't. It's often just about technical artistry. I think of something like projection mapping, which for a while I was really suckered by because it's kind of a miracle, in a way. It feels like, "Oh my god." Then after a while you think, "Wow… That's just not really about anything." This is something that bothers me, the endless "not really about anything" nature of so much work. So much of this kind of art involves some kind of beautiful, mathematical, precision of something that is laid on top of something else. I look at it, and I think, "Wow, that's really impressive." I'm genuinely impressed and it's beautiful, but it kind of feels like a Coke ad. There is no story. It doesn't say anything, but it's fun to look at.

You've mentioned that you often work with the same team of people to create your work. These pieces are assembled, in some ways, like movies. You're like the conductor or director. You assemble a team of people who know how to

make each individual part of the piece work.

It's probably more like an auteur film. The film time and period that I love is the Golden Age of studio films. That was just this magical period, the Golden Age of repertory filmmaking. That's why I like to work with the same people over and over again. You find people you trust and then you get out of their way. You make room in your work for other people to do their work, and then this thing becomes something that's much bigger than you are. That is why I do it. It's this great little, tiny Socialist adventure every time.

So much of the narrative around technology, at least in popular culture, is increasingly negative. People feel enslaved by their phones. I know people who install programs on their computers in order to block them from using it, to limit how much they look at the internet or go on Facebook.

I actually love my phone, but I know what you mean. It's as if, somehow, you're helpless. Frankly there is no real off switch to the entire culture, unless you want to go live in a mud hut somewhere. I think that technology can be like magic, but it's something that we really have to think profoundly and critically about. It's a cautionary tale. If we aren't careful we end up with machines bossing us around, and not much agency. People are a little bit clueless. All these things are happening in every decade. As time goes along, people are, in a sense, more and more spaced out. They're interested in the technology, but they seem clueless about the ramifications of it. I like using technology itself to tell that story. I would hope that the fun, and the beauty, or the magic of the work would seduce people into spending time with critical concepts that they might not normally think about.

For a young artist who is maybe following a similar path as you in regards to working with technology and new media—who perhaps isn't interested in, say, making paintings or sellable objects—is there any kind of sustaining advice you'd have for them?

It's hard right now. I taught for 15 years, and teaching was the closest thing that I found to having a job that didn't feel like a job. I mean, it was *still* a job, but it was complementary to what I was doing. Working alone can be more hermetic. I did that for many years, too. I started out way back in the gallery system and I really didn't like it. Once I got out and I didn't have to think in terms of making things that were for sale, per se, it was this huge freedom for me, it was like somebody took the lid off and I just went crazy.

For many years my work was supported by a combination of grants and foundations, sometimes individual donors, but a big chunk of the time while I was thinking about the new technologies, and doing the script writing at that early development stage, I would also be fundraising and grant writing. I managed to do that for a number of years, but it's getting harder and harder to do. I used to write for 20 grants a year, and now I'm lucky if I can find three or four. It's changed. I'd suggest trying to find a way to support your habit so that you're not necessarily depending on the work itself to make your living.

A lot of people coming out of these school programs go to work for interactive design companies, and they think of themselves as artists, and designers, and creatives. It's a kind of fusion. Sometimes there's a little bit of confusion in there about how they do it. When they make their own work, a lot of times it looks as if it's been influenced by their client work instead of the other way around, which was more the context when I was coming up. In the future, I would hope that there would be more work like this, that uses these technological tools, but starts to do something else. In a sense I almost feel like it's my job to say, "Yeah, you could do this, but you could also do other things." There are all these other unexplored possibilities.



There are different ways to approach having some kind of creative life. I think the problem for a lot of people is that their livelihood is also directly harnessed to their creative output, which muddies the waters in ways that you can't always anticipate.

It really does. I think you have to protect your work, and protecting your work sometimes means that you have to find ways to trick yourself into not paying attention to what the criteria in the exterior world for success is. You know, "Have I gotten this? Am I in that club? Am I part of that scene?" You have to try to and step outside of that so you can see clearly enough to make up your own path.

Do you find that your parameters for what success looks like have changed dramatically the longer you've been making things?

I think so. I think you often start out thinking things like, "Well, if I want to do this, then I want to be in this. If I'm going to be in this field, I'd want the thing that everybody says is the most important." Then you try for that, and those things don't happen and then something else happens, and often the other things that happen become much more interesting to you than it would have been to do that original thing, to be in that museum show or whatever. You went off and did something that was idiosyncratic in some way, and it opened other doors and led you into this other space that liberated you in different ways.

I think it's important to remember that what you put out in the world is what brings work back to you, and brings responses to you, and brings opportunities to you. If you're consistently putting something out in the world that isn't what you really want to be doing, it's going to take you on a path that isn't right. It's going to make you feel like you have somebody else's life. I think the hardest thing, the biggest challenge, is being able to protect that. To protect yourself from those external ideas of what constitutes success.

It's a constant challenge. I mean, I don't really fit anywhere. I'm sort of in between everything. So I use that for myself sometimes just to say, "Well, I don't have to worry about that being a criteria for me because I'm not

in that world." I'm over *here*, I'm something else. Then sometimes that drives you crazy. There's this old Spanish proverb that says, "Take what you want and pay for it." So maybe you get a certain amount of freedom, but you don't get something else. If you work within a prescribed platform, there's a kind of critical mass of attention that is easier to get than when you're over here…and then here…and then here…and here.

You make these different choices as you go along. I think you just need to check in with yourself and make sure that you're getting close to actually having the life that you think you want to have. The career you choose has all sorts of things that come along with it—human beings, conversations, dinner party requirements, clubs that you're going to belong to, places that you're required to go. That thing you thought you wanted could be the worst thing that ever happened to you. It could bore the crap out of you. It's all about remembering to ask yourself from time to time, what do I *really* want?

Toni Dove recommends:

I think the most important thing you can learn to do is to get out of your own way and learn to trust yourself. 98% of what's actually important that you're going to use isn't conscious, it's right underneath. If you try to control things too much, you'll lose the best part.

Be generous to your peers.

Ghost stories and short story structures are very interesting to me. Ghost stories particularly because they have very idiosyncratic architectures. There's a narrative pyrotechnic in most ghost stories. I think short stories are crafted almost like poetry, they're elegantly built off and then carefully constructed. I'm interested in that.

One of the things that I come back to all the time is our own physiological apparatus as a resource for design because I'm interested in embodied interface. I'm interested in all the ways that our body unconsciously navigates the real world and how we can use those same things to navigate media. I like to reset back to the human body, to refresh my thinking about interface sometimes.

I always come back to Henry James, and the ghost stories of Elizabeth Bowen. Movies from the '40s and the '70s. I have conversations with the ghost of Virginia Woolf. She's interested in some of the narrative stuff I'm trying to do. She feels sorry for us about technology.

I saw one of the most amazing theater pieces that I've ever seen by Katie Mitchell and the National Theater of England. It was based on Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and it was basically a whole stage full of objects and little video cameras, and aquariums of water, with a bunch of people operating them and occasionally dancing, and doing all this stuff. Basically what it did was create a movie of *The Waves* on the overhead screen.

Name
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