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An Interview with Sandy Stone

Gerl Wittig on Apr 8 1999

issue 11

interview with Sandy Stone

Interview with Allucquere Rosanne (Sandy) Stone - Associate Professor and Director of the Advanced Communication Technologies Laboratory (ACTLab) in the department of Radio-TV-Film at the University of Texas at Austin, where she studies issues related to interface, interaction, and desire : <http://www.sandystone.com/>. She is the author of **The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age**. Interview by Brett Stalbaum and Gerl Wittig:

Gerl Wittig: You've stated that a large part of your research interest is in how the concept of the university is changing in response to the deprivileging of texts. In your book, "The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age," you wrote

(Laughter) <http://www.sandystone.com/>

GW: We're laughing at Mr. Mike right now (a PlaySkool tape recorder).

Sandy Stone: How can I give a straight answer when your machine is laughing at me?

GW: I'll turn him the other way.

SS: How can I give a straight answer when your machine is ignoring me?

(Laughter)

GW: In your book, "The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age," you wrote "At the heart of my effort is the growing belief that the space of interaction between the academic and other worlds and between academic worlds themselves is undergoing deep and disturbing change, in complex cause-effect interaction with the emergence of new communications prosthetics."

How do you think how we define the concepts of academic credentials and warrantability is impacted by the expansion of audience and participants in academic discourse made possible by computer mediated communications technology and the increasing hybridization of fields?

SS: Thank you for your brief, but entertaining question. I think that in most ways the university as we now know it is already dead. But the present university system has a nervous system like a dinosaur -- when you chop off the tail it takes awhile for the head to realize that something's gone wrong. In 1999, through electronic media such as the Web, a great deal of information is available through other sources than books. Universities can go on pretending for a long time that they are still the major sources of knowledge in our culture because in a sense they are the final arbiters of what the contents of books mean - even though most people are getting their information from somewhere else, and assigning their own meanings to what they read and see. To riff on Bill Gibson, the street finds its own uses for meaning. In the next millennium, universities will become credentialing establishments, rather than privileged sources of knowledge, to a greater degree than they already are. This leaves us with the question

of how long can universities survive in that fashion. And I think the answer is that they can maintain as long as industry is willing to put up with it. Companies will start hiring people with requisite skills whether or not they possess any particular credentials. That approach works at the inception of new skill sets and for a while afterward, because a manager class -- that is, people dedicated to management skills who don't themselves possess the highly honed technical skills to do the job well -- hasn't yet emerged. Eventually all of the people who apply for all of the jobs will be indifferently credentialed, and a manager class will be in place. And then there will no longer be anybody at the mid or high vel who can quickly tell whether an applicant is skilled or not, and they will get back to the issue of credentialing and will have to reinvent it. But all the time that that's going on, the university system and its method of credentialing will still exist, and there will still be traditional businesses that operate on the basis of those credentials and in no other way. I doubt that the old credentialing methods will die off in all areas of expertise, because, for instance, corporations will always need MBAs and MBAs come into existence through traditional degrees in traditional universities whose methods are well understood by managers already in place.

GW: It seems that credentials and warrantability are pre-established in the activist community in a particularly hierarchical way, that may mirror academic structures. Based on your experience in the academic realm, how would sulate the struggle for positioning in the activist communities wilbe transformed by expansion of activity and activism into the virtual?

SS: This is affected by speed of communication. The fact that the net does make things very, very fast means that in online activist groups when people get disaffected with something they simply start another discussion thread. In real life it's not easy to change threads so quickly - there is more social and cultural inertia. And action threads have different consequences from discussion threads.

GW: You use performance as a creative technique of scholarship, could you speak a little about that? Could you describe some of the performance art you're doing and what you've discovered in the process of integrating this approach into the academic landscape that you're working within?

SS: There are all kinds of ways of talking about my performance work. One is to say that it's terribly retrogressive - that I've just gone back to the modernist or the pre-modernist time out of sheer perversity. My work in performance at the moment is based on the idea that describing New Media requires completely new theories and methods. This is because when you look at New Media through the lens of old paradigms, what you invariably get is old media. So we have to generate a new framework, a new episteme. In the process of doing that, I've been experimenting with going back to something that is mediated only by my personal physical presence, which is a heavy enough mediation, but at least it's limiting the variables. So I'm using the surface of my body as a generator of language. This approach depends upon the existence of mutually understood social and cultural codes that operate below the conscious level, and then trying to mess with them in some way. Because I am working in close proximity to a live audience, they are, shall we say, inside my irony distortion field. Consequently I can mess around with proxemics and voice tone, and so forth. Which I do unmercifully. This works not so much because I feel that we have been able to generate any new languages yet (although maybe we have), but because I find that people who experience the performances go away asking good questions -- and that's the whole purpose. Ultimately my idea for what a university is about is that one should go away not necessarily with better answers but with better questions, and if people go away from my performances feeling that they've been entertained or confused or struck by lightning then we're getting somewhere. The performances themselves change very quickly over time. They're modular in form, so with each performance I can add a new module or remove one. Eventually I will run out of modules, and when that happens I'll find something else to do with my life. I'm experimenting with other stuff already. This is gonna sound weird, but I've done a couple of installation pieces - hanging pieces in galleries, and so forth - which is to say, plain vanilla modernist stuff. This may be a phase I'm just running through and will get over, or else I'm stuck in it and I'll die in it, or it isn't really what it seems to be and there's something else going on other than just being weirdly modernist. And we'll see - I don't know, I don't have any insight into it yet. I'm just trying to figure out what the hell I'm trying to say and find different ways to say it. I'm writing a screenplay, a narrative film. It has a beginning, middle and end - it has a narrative arc. Presumably you walk away feeling satisfied. And what the hell is that!? All I'm doing there is old Aristotelean stuff, so how does that speak to all the theoretical issues we raise in New Media work - and the answer is it probably doesn't. So once I run through that stage of my work, I have to go back and figure out how to more directly address the theoretical issues that I myself am raising. They do get addressed in things like Cynbe's (her husband) writing a distributed server system. In a sense, my current performance work can be read as a direct attack on a lot of the issues I talk about in my theoretical work. But why, exactly, I'm doing such atavistic stuff at the moment - I don't know. It just seems to be the right thing. That's all I can say.

GW: Why don't you perform in the U.S. more often?

SS: One reason is that European audiences are, on the face of it, more savvy in general to experimentation. And at the same time much of European culture is very, very repressive, very conservative. And yet, for example, when I perform in Germany someone may come up to me and say - "Well I just want you to not be disappointed, I want you to understand that German audiences are very, very quiet. If you do things that are meant to rouse them, they may not be roused." And I say "thank you, I'll remember that" - but I've never had an audience in Germany that didn't go screaming whacko over the parts of my piece in which they're supposed to go screaming whacko. The other issue is that there's still more money for art in the social democracies in Europe than there is in the United States. But that's not hard, because there's no public money for art in the United States. Period, full stop. Thirdly, universities in the United States, which in many ways are a lot less conservative than their counterparts in other countries, are far more conservative with regard to boundaries between art, technology and theory than many institutions outside the US. So those are Sandy's three reasons for why she usually performs outside the United States.

GW: How are the 20th century art historical traditions of performance altered by the notion of network performance?

SS: Oh boy - you know if I answer that I'm going to get into a lot of trouble. Okay, I don't think they have been very much. There are some kinds of performances that are influenced by network performance, but online and offline are two completely different registers. A network performance has the problem of decoupling, the distancing of agency. We do network performances at the ACTLab and they're interesting, but then you get a live person in a room with a group of people and you do something performative, and you get a whole different register of reaction. And quite honestly, I - in my terribly atavistic way - when I'm working, I prefer hearing people laughing or crying out there in the dark beyond the spotlights. I've been blessed with actually hearing someone crying in the audience when I was doing a particular piece that was meant to evoke an emotion of sadness. And as far as what the performer learns from the performance, which is what I'm interested in right now, offline is vastly different and incomparable to what happens online, because you don't have that crucial bandwidth online. You don't have the connection, the opportunity to re-experience interactively what the people for whom you're doing the performance are doing. There's a lot to be learned from that for the development of my own work. Actually, that's why I started performing. My first performance was completely different from anything I'd experienced before. The main difference was that it was like working in front of a blast furnace with the door open. The audience was so present to me, and their responses were so important for what I was doing that I found myself rewriting the piece instantly on the fly - while I was performing it. And that level of interaction is what works for me right now. Which is why I don't do much in the way of online performance at this time. But I encourage other people to do it.

There are times when the Honoria in Ciberspazio project is online - the ACTLab's cyberopera - when online performance works very well. This is a project that some of my graduate students have been doing for three or four years now. The libretto was written interactively online. People would send in couplets and then Honoria, the director, would post the couplets to the opera's web site. Then we staged a performance in my living room with a CU-SeeMe camera. Then we began trying ways in which people might influence the performance interactively. Recently the opera has turned into a La Scala-scale thing with elaborate costumes and a full orchestral score. And of course the budget has gone through the roof! Now the people who were doing all the creative work are running around trying to raise money instead. They're still having a good time, but even they have been reduced occasionally to putting it on in front of an audience. That's a completely different way of doing the opera. Parenthetically, it's also a way they can get attention that they can't get online, and raise money that they can't raise online. They've never been able to get potential backers to give a dime from participating in one of the interactive performances. It's when they actually deal with physical spectacle that they're able to engage investors. This is a problem which is still unsolved.

One of the things that happens at this point is we're likely to sit down and say "well, it was because the bandwidth's too small, we need bigger screens, we need better audio, we need more definition - all the problems will be fixed when we get those things" -- which is really bullshit. Everybody in this biz has done full-on experiments with video walls, and video walls with stereo sound, and video walls with better and worse definition. It works for awhile - video walls are always fine, you have a new kind of space that opens into another new kind of space. It does change the quality of interaction profoundly, but it has limits. We still don't know what all of those limits are, but a lot of them have to do with how organic perception works. Psychologically speaking, the environment created by physical space and videowall space and full-immersive space are mutually incommensurable. Which is to say that even the best video wall doesn't seem to substitute for being able to walk into a space and move your

eyes around in it. On the other hand, experiments with telepresence where you have control over which direction the telesensors' eyes are looking are very interesting. You do get a very heightened sense of the presence of the teleoperator. NASA Ames built a teleoperated submersible rover to travel under the polar ice cap. They had it moored someplace temporarily, so they could go down in wet suits and work on the thing. They had somebody in the operator station with the headset on, connected to a pair of stereo video lenses and so forth that are under the rover. While there was somebody down there working on the device they were talking back and forth to the person in the teleoperator station. The teleoperator was looking around and turned his head to look at the person who was working underwater. The motion of his head was transmitted by his VR headset to the movable video cameras on the rover, so down underwater the video lenses turned to match the movement. The diver reported that when those lenses swung around and looked at him, he had an uncanny sense of the teleoperator's presence hovering right behind the lenses. He said it made him jump right out of his skin - it was so intense. So there may be something there, there hasn't been a lot of work done on that. I've been talking to my graduate class about making a Furby that instantiates me. A fuzzy teleoperative device that can turn its head around to look at you. I want to find out whether that uncanny sense that the diver had, the sense that there really was a ghost in the box, came from the fact that it could look at you. So we may try that.

GW: How do you evaluate the power of simulated performance or the simulation of performance? Do you think we can maintain any kind of clear distinction between simulation and reality, especially given that the role of abstractions and simulations are functional processes within power structures such as the economy?

SS: No. I don't think that we can maintain that difference, in fact I think it's already gone. But as with the universities, persistent structures, we have within ourselves a persistence of the sense that those divisions still exist - after they have dissolved - because it keeps us sane. Our kids will do better, we ourselves will do better with time. We're certainly doing better than people who are older than we are. This has to do with being immersed, I think, in the entire episteme. With that comes the ability to swim in it and the ability to absorb without having to learn in any specific way the episteme in which those things make sense. That's the way around my problem of studying New Media. I've seen that happen in various fields. One of them was the second wave feminist resurgence of the 70's, when we thought that there would be a direct cause and effect relationship between doing good feminist theory and the rise of a generation of feminists. I think there was no such identifiable cause and effect at all. Everybody went on speechifying and theorifying and then all of a sudden we were hip deep in Riot Grrrls, who seemed to come from nowhere and had no particular political consciousness as we understood it, but were utterly relieved of any sense of oppression. A similar thing happened with Trans liberation. After I wrote the Posttranssexual Manifesto I hoped Transies would develop a body of theory and we'd get some kind of orderly progress -- the traditional European model in which the intellectuals lead the revolution. But the next thing I knew there was a whole new generation of Transkids who were simply liberated because they were liberated - not because they'd read theory necessarily, but because they didn't give a fuck about consequences. And they went out and started to conquer the world. In retrospect I'm not sure there was any cause/effect relationship. There may be, but I don't know what it is. And it's the same with online-fu. I would love to think that there will be a direct theoretical line of descent between the kinds of things that we're all doing and people who are freed from the idea that there is a boundary between simulation and the real, but I don't think it's going to happen that way.

Brett Stalbaum: Much of your work has explored the relationships between the low-bandwidth communication common to online communications and issues of identity. You say in your essay "Virtual Systems" that "narrowing the bandwidth has startling effects", on how subjects construct themselves in terms of desire and power. And you state that the "bounded social individual is engaged, willfully or otherwise, in a process of translation to the refigured and reinscribed agencies of virtual systems." By contrast, within the traditional context of Civil Disobedience, one of the central principles involved is the implementation of what you have called the "fiduciary self" as the object of the disobedience action. How do you speculate that this discourse of the self within the context of Civil Disobedience may be altered within Electronic Civil Disobedience.

SS: You should be answering that question more than I, because you're actually doing it.

BS: I think you maybe put your finger on it in the answer to the previous question in that it has more to do with being engaged in the system and that the answer will emerge from people's engagement with the system more so than it will from any distinct theory about how this might occur.

SS: Ok, I agree with that. There are many ways in which we absorb the mutated paradigm without needing to have a language through which we can actually articulate

it. And this is one of the great headbanger puzzles of the close of the mechanical age. It's the increasing awareness that not only can we do that, but in fact most of the work of crafting a civilization proceeds on the basis of tacit knowledges, imperfect assumptions, and clever workarounds. This gets me and most of the people I know into a kind of tizzy. Not so much me, because I just want to say let's get on with it, but the people who want to study these things in an orderly way. Those who want to be able to construct some sort of account - a reasonable or rational account of what's happening - - (a) get very upset by this and (b) redouble their efforts to provide some explanatory framework which might be able to get closure on the problem. And if we want to talk about this stuff, we may wind up constructing narratives, for no better nor less reason than that narratives satisfy and can provide the closure which explanation sometimes cannot. Otherwise we don't have any beginning point, we don't have any place from which to start. But many of the things we talk about in New Media aren't capturable within explanatory discourse at all. We only manage to talk around those things, which is why the title of my most popular seminar at UT is "Theory and Methods of an Unnameable Discourse". Therefore how do you proceed except by action -- and that's not a question really; it's a shrug of my shoulders, we're doing it. And if we can't build traditional theoretical structures around New Media, my tendency at this point, which does not get me any points in the Radio, TV, Film department, is who gives a fuck.

BS: A similar issue emerges within the context of fine art through the discourse of the modernist artistic identity and more fragmented "postmodern" artistic identities. How does low-bandwidth art (such as evidenced in the emergence of the international net.art scene), potentially impact artistic identity?

SS: Artists who choose to work through the virtual media, the ones I speak to, are willing to settle for less individual identification. Many tend to be more interested in the collective project. But of course there are a lot of artists who won't settle for that at all - they need their serial number on the thing, and therefore you develop a large number of groups each one of which contains artists who are able or willing to do the things that allow them to get on with the work. Which implies that artists who do virtual work have less ego investment in name recognition than people who do other stuff. So whether one is going to influence the other very heavily is more or less a non-issue. I just see them developing in parallel. Until we find some way to be able to put trademarks on virtual events, it'll pretty much be like that.

BS: One of the serious critiques made of Electronic Civil Disobedience as practiced by us in the Electronic Disturbance Theater is that through its collective and participatory model it consumes a lot of network bandwidth in its attempt to overwhelm targeted web sites. Much of this critique has come from the hacker community, where there is traditionally a respect or perhaps an aesthetic appreciation for asynchronous (or low-bandwidth) agency as opposed to the much less elegant high-bandwidth approach of a tool like the FloodNet applet used by the EDT. Now this may make for an interesting parallel between the effects of low-bandwidth communication on identity and the preference of hackers for low-bandwidth action, especially given that hackers also maintain (though often out necessity), constructed identities meant to obscure their fiduciary (or legally liable) selves. Do you see any such parallel between hackers' identity and low-bandwidth communication?

SS: I do, although I think that hackers maintain a low profile on their identity for a number of different reasons. One reason is some kind of fear of reprisal. Certainly shyness is another reason. But many hackers inhabit their handles more deeply than they inhabit their birth names, so what looks like an attempt to alias is actually nothing more than another way of creating oneself in a very deep and wide bandwidth sense. Many hackers evince a strong sense of community ethics, which leads the idea of the online town meeting, where everyone has an opportunity to be heard, and where cluttering up the bandwidth is considered to be a breach of the social contract. In this sense many hackers, though certainly not all, tend to be extremely conservative - in the old sense, in the way they think about how government and community should fit together. And that I think are some of the reasons that we see so much resistance to actions that use up bandwidth.

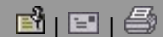
BS: Many contemporary discourses about online communication are heavily concerned with issues of privacy. Many artists and activists have, at least initially, taken the position that the emerging network culture is threatened by the specter of "Big Brother" or mono-corporate surveillance systems. One of the things that the Electronic Disturbance Theater has tried to suggest is that these systems are just systems, and that wherever there is a system in place it can be infiltrated and mucked around with in a manner that is ultimately productive. How might your work inform either of these perspectives, especially as they pertain to issues of anonymity, secrecy, identity and the body?

SS: I don't think that we're doing anything now, in this regard, I don't think that we're doing much of anything now that we haven't been doing for thousands and thousands of years. The technology gets more complex, but basically we're dealing with the same

problems of how to live, how to get on, how to eke out some kind of a happy existence in the presence of oppressive technologies. It doesn't matter whether we're talking about snoopy bosses, or snoopy relatives, or snoopy high technology surveillance devices. I think it was Henry Kuttner who wrote a wonderful science fiction story a number of years ago set in a future society in which there were the most incredibly sophisticated technological devices for surveillance and oppression. The story was about how crooks just continued to develop more and more highly sophisticated workarounds to get past all this highly sophisticated stuff. The story was an up yours to the Big Brother idea that ultimately the state will develop technology so oppressive that nobody can beat it. But we humans are endlessly inventive, and we get more inventive the more our backs get to the wall. It's amazing how much weirdness you can get out of what are basically just lightly modified plains apes. Technology - it's damn hard to make a piece of technology that is markedly superior to something that some hacker can come up with in their basement. And on into the future with more and more complex systems. Until we get bombed back into the stone age and have to start over with more simple systems. But seriously, I just see that as infinite ramification on scales of complexity. It may not be a satisfying answer, but it's the only one I can think of.

BS: Do you think there's a responsibility for activists to look for these things, as if our backs were constantly against the wall?

SS: Oh I don't think that activists can stop doing that. It's second nature. It's what activism is about. And it's one of the things that drives all of us to better and better achievement. Wherever an oppressive technology arises, you will find a sophisticated activist group or entity arising in response. That just seems to be the way perverse, ornery humans are, and thank god for ornery humanity -- it's the greatest thing we've got.



::CrossReference

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