

Interview für das Künstlerbuch DOUG AITKEN. Return to the Real

Barbara Bergmann und Dr. Svenja Frank
im Gespräch mit Doug Aitken

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Barbara Bergmann (BB):

When we saw your show in Frankfurt am Main in 2015, we were so impressed. It's very rare to see a moving image installation in which you are so immersed. Often you enter a video room and leave after a few minutes; but when we saw *SONG1* and *migration (empire)*, for example, we stayed and were engaged from beginning to end. How do you approach making your works, and how do you consider the viewer when you are creating?

Doug Aitken (DA):

Art can be many things, and it can explore many concepts and diverse mediums. Within my practice, some of the works I make use moving images. When I approach filmic works, I'm always interested in the idea of breaking the screen and creating a situation where the viewer is really in the world of the work and really moving with it, dancing with it, merging with it, and being challenged by it.

The history of narrative is the history of storytelling, from the campfire conversation to theater, books, and opera—or to the creation of film. In all these situations, the viewer is always passive, is a voyeur or an observer. I became very interested in finding a way to go into and beyond the screen. Initially, in the 1990s, I was experimenting in a literal way with multi-screen works, and I became more and more interested in not only creating environments for the works to exist but also in new forms of storytelling and narrative structures.

It's a fascinating subject because it reflects on how we see life and explore the way our world is changing. The landscape around us is constantly evolving and, perceptually, we're outgrowing some of the old modes and evolving into new frequencies of perception. We live in a much more non-linear world now, a world that consists of fragments, pieces of information, pulses of words and language; it's accelerating more rapidly.

I think my work grows out of this condition and emerges out of this constantly changing landscape.

BB:

You often combine architecture, music, and film. How do you integrate different media? Do you have an idea at the beginning when you start the work, or do these elements present themselves discreetly and later merge into something visual?

DA:

Making art is a living act. It's as simple as the act of living. You're continuously moving, you're experiencing and sensing, and because these experiences are processed, they can become the DNA for a work of art, the ingredients for creativity that builds over time.

The creative process for me is very kaleidoscopic. It's open and fragmented, and I'm very interested in welding together disparate ideas—fusing things that at times seem like they are non-sequitur, and maybe don't make sense or are seemingly awkward—and creating new structures with them. There are different ways to create. Some projects are very singular and happen quickly. The idea is conceived, then I build off that and make the work. But other projects are a series of words or images that I find myself collaging together. And that can be strange and foreign. It can be a struggle, while at other times that sequencing can seamlessly start to build itself and create form and structure.

I work in a very polyphonic way where I have different ideas happening simultaneously, and that often evolves into works that might be in different media. It might be that one concept crystalizes into a live performance, or something else is an earthwork in the landscape and another may be a moving image or architectural.

I have never really been interested in restricting that or defining myself by a medium because I feel like making art is more of an outward thrust. I'm creating a tapestry of ideas woven together, and I try to use the most precise, eloquent, or strongest system at that moment to express it. I think making art can work in very flexible way that can lead you into new and unexpected directions.

In Los Angeles, at our studio, it's so diverse. We have notebooks full of ideas, and eventually we sift through them and they'll reduce themselves to less and less, and you get closer to the essence. When it reaches that point, then you know which ideas to move on with.

I'm constantly working on diverse projects, but they feel completely interconnected like a root system that comes back to certain questions. Our lives in the 21st century balance a tenuous line between what is fiction and what is reality. We question our sense of "self" in relation to the landscape and world around us.

BB:

Before this interview, we only met in the digital world through video calls; now we're sitting at a table facing each other in "real life." It's interesting that you gave our exhibition the title *Return to the Real*. What does "the real" mean to you? Do you believe that reality is a construction?

DA:

I think we're all authors of our own reality. In that sense, I think that reality is a construct. One of the interesting qualities of art is how it has the ability to puncture the surface of what we think we know; it can penetrate the veneer of the everyday. That's one of the incredible values of art.

When you ask this question, you're questioning the idea of what reality is. Reality is a kind of fiction that each individual authors in a different way; but sometimes a work of art can create a catalyst or a crystallization for an alternative view of this.

BB:

Do you think that experiencing art can support a "return to the real"?

DA:

I think the title of the show, *Return to the Real*, implies the idea that, as individuals, we live in a society that has been accelerating faster and faster; and within that acceleration, our ideas of experience have become flattened. I think we're reaching a point where there's a crossroads where we're always finding ourselves divorced from depth, and we are at times struggling to penetrate the surface. We attempt to discover our grounding and our roots, yet it's very difficult. A lot of the work I make attempts to create tools to allow this to happen, using artworks as a way to slow down, to decelerate time, and reconnect with the idea of the self and the landscape around us.

The installation *HOWL* is an artwork that I filmed over several years in a very desolate remote landscape. In this desert landscape is a region where the entire economy has been based on drilling for oil, and this drilling has continued since the 1930s. Day and night, these machines frack and hack the landscape, extracting oil. But the work is really about the idea of the individual. The people who appear in the piece have spent their lives there, but they're struggling to discover what's next and to find a sense of the future.

For me, that idea is very profound: What is the future, and where are we going?

I'm interested in the unknown and the unrealized. I'm not attracted to absolutes or to things that are black and white, right or wrong. As a society, we need a space that has abstraction and ambiguity, and culture allows us to have these dreams and visions.

BB:

Many of your works, including your new installation *HOWL*, reflect a tension between humanity, nature, and modern life. The people in *HOWL* seem to be disappointed about a life that could have been different. On the other hand, they are also proud of how they manage their lives in this landscape.

We are showing your work *Wilderness* here at the Schauwerk. Can you speak about how you conceived the work during the pandemic? How did your ideas of individuals' experiences factor in, and why did you choose to layer digitized voices rather than use human voices?

DA:

The idea of individuality for me is very fascinating. What does it mean to be an individual in society when society is this endless tapestry of connectivity? How do you find a sense of self?

In *Wilderness*, I was looking at this idea of landscape where you have people at the end of the Earth, the edge of a continent where the land stops and the ocean starts, and everyone is pushed up against the horizon. All the people we see in *Wilderness* are looking out at the horizon watching the setting sun. In *Wilderness*, this idea of lands' end becomes a unifying thread. The entire film is shot from late afternoon into night, on a beach where there is a wildly diverse human energy. You find this spectrum of people from young to old, from rich to poor. During the pandemic, I'd been thinking about how we have been living in a world that is geographically so diverse and broad, but suddenly we're confined in one place; you're where you are, and maybe a ten mile radius is your new reality. In *Wilderness*, I wanted to use that weakness as a strength. I made this film/artwork *Wilderness* entirely within a one-mile radius of where I live, where I sleep at night. And I would walk out every evening and film this work. We would find people on the street and the beaches, and they became the characters in the work. Although the film looks like one day or a single sunset, I filmed it over hundreds of days during the pandemic and post-pandemic period.

Svenja Frank (SF):

So the people who appear in *Wilderness* are not actors you hired, but people you met by chance on the beach?

DA:

Yes. Everyone in *Wilderness* is someone who was drifting by; who showed up and I met and spoke to. By making this work, I could collaborate with people and bring them into this fictional landscape and share with them this poem that I was creating, this song cycle about the future. I was fascinated by the idea of taking the chaos of the ordinary, the everyday and creating a structure within that chaos—taking this random landscape of people disconnected, drifting, and passing by and creating a connective tissue. With *Wilderness*, there was initially that aspect, and then I started thinking of words and phrases in my mind, and I started writing them down like you would write a poem.

I started imagining these like they were electric haikus for the digital era. I began to write song cycles, and I started finding people on the beach or in the streets who could sing the verses I had written. Often, I played the music to them, and, at first, they were saying, "What is this? I'm confused," but then they would gradually fall into it and become almost hypnotized and seduced by it. That became the core of *Wilderness*: this idea of a synthetic poem, a digital composition that moves from person to person and creates this surreal connectivity where there normally seems to be none.

SF:

And that makes it feel unreal.

DA:

In *Wilderness*, you have a friction between raw tactile scenes, like people against an old wooden pier or a parking lot filled with broken glass, someone alone, lost and gazing at the

bright setting sun, juxtaposed with a digitized artificial intelligence seeping into this world and leaching into our subconscious... What is the real?

I had lunch with a friend recently, and he talked about how he's creating his job proposals through artificial intelligence. I asked him what happens when you get hired, and they are actually hiring the AI and not you. You've erased your personality. You haven't written anything or left any space for little quirks and the mistakes that create our personality; instead, you're just presented as this perfected and synthetic human.

SF:

This is very interesting because we have been talking about the rapid development of new technology. What was unimaginable years ago is rapidly being introduced, and new technology is constantly normalized.

Do you think VR will become a major theme in art, or to what extent are you integrating the latest technologies into your practice?

DA:

I think the conversation about our technology is fascinating, but actual technology and innovation have always been part of art; and from the invention of perspective to the Lumière brothers' early films to sound and film—all of these moments are underscored by shifts in technology.

All these chapters at one point have been harnessed by different creators into new phases of human expression. I think the key point for me is that you use the technology—the technology doesn't use you.

Often, you find people who are defined by their medium, as much as oil painters might be defined by their paint and canvas, we also find someone who says: "I'm a VR artist." I don't really find that so interesting. You're a human being, and you live and breathe and have a life and this amazing spectrum of experiences. Why define yourself by a material, a medium, or an occupation?

When you talk about art and technology, there are many attempts to create synthetic worlds—alternate worlds—whether it's virtual or augmented reality. The acceleration of our society pulls us in different directions as individuals. We don't always want to put on a VR headset; instead, we wish to reconnect with something that's physical and natural. I find that, in this digital age, we're now valuing the natural world perhaps more so than we were in the past.

Barbara, that goes back to your question earlier, of the diversity of working on pieces in a broader spectrum of media. I always want to remain curious and, while making art, to feed on that curiosity, to be like fuel on the fire, to let it burn hotter and use that energy and merge with the ideas and questions that I'm restless about.

Art can come from friction; and with that friction, you can allow yourself to work in any way. That's how I'd like to see art in the future. Art that is untethered, that is not constructed to fit safely within the restraints of our society.

Art can be anywhere, any place, and it can be a part of us, it can be an agent of change, something that we discover deep in the forest as much as something that we think of in our minds. Art is a vast landscape.

I think we're actually at the beginning of an incredible cultural revolution; and whether we know it or not, we're part of this, we're implicit in this moment of change. The act of living feeds into that because we're living through a paradigm shift, a moment in society that's unprecedented.

When you were young, maybe you played a record and watched a movie in the theater, and now that barely exists. Maybe your grandmother didn't have electricity, like mine didn't. Now, we look at the velocity of change, and we see these gradual arcs, like the Gutenberg printing press, the mechanical revolution, and the digital revolution. These arcs create new plateaus, some of which permeate the global landscape, like the creation of plastics, atomic and nuclear energy, and the digital realm. In these new chapters, we are actually seeing the fundamental questioning of what reality is; and in that, we're seeing a kind of rupture of our previous notions of what it means to be alive.

What is real, what is not? This is such a fundamental shift because, traditionally, it was our family or our tribe or religion that would keep us anchored in this sense of security and stability. Such as the cave painting that warns us not to burn the forest, or we will have no more food to survive. I think now of the security of reality as being something which is unquestioned and is permanently eroding, and we are seeing this incredible and profound questioning.

BB:

Would you describe yourself as religious in a very general sense? Some scenes in *Wilderness* seem mystical or spiritual...

SF:

... the scene with all the people on the beach stretching their hands to the sky with their cell phones, with the sequences getting rhythmically faster, call to mind a ceremony or ecstatic celebration.

DA:

There's a scene in *Wilderness* where the sun is about to set; it's a very thin line at the horizon as the sun drops and people start holding their phones, and our film gently moves behind the phone screen, and you don't see an image on the screen, you just see colors, chromas, and the different phones start connecting and synchronizing with each other. It reveals a landscape of digital pulses of flashing and moving monochrome colors.

BB:

It seems very spiritual. Each of us has our own experience of sunset and sunrise. It's both a primal yet often communal experience.

DA:

What you're saying is so interesting. When I was making *Wilderness*, I realized how primal that moment of the setting sun was, and I watched it and filmed it day after day after day to make this piece. I saw hundreds of sunsets to make this work, over and over again. I realized it's this incredibly democratic moment, where everyone is unified by this single action, the collapse of the sun into darkness. It creates a primal energy and a sense of singularity and existential isolation. The sun drops, and a new chapter starts, a primal human mystery or a sense of wildness. We ask what's happening, where are we going, and what's next. That sense of the unknown ... for me, *Wilderness* was really a deeply personal piece to make because I wanted it to be both incredibly minimal but also complex in its layers.

You have this location, the beach, that feels like the end of the Earth, the end of the land, the place where land stops and falls into the ocean, and day erodes to night. This concept is so simple. It's almost stupidly simple; but then you have this strange composition of diverse and unconnected people, reconnected through words and language within the artwork.

Wilderness is like an invisible network where the voices we hear come out of the people as digital voices, yet the scenes are deeply human. A child on the beach is wrapped in old clothes and covered in sand and dirt; he is lying down and looking into the distance. Or a man with face tattoos, his muscles twitching, and then he stops and stares at you. In *Wilderness*, each of them speaks a verse, a word, a small and intimate expression that draws you in.

BB:

The sun is the basis of the existence of humankind. Life revolves around the daily sunrise.

SF:

It's important for all life on earth. If the sun didn't exist, there would be no life. And it's also very interesting because the sun has been worshipped as a powerful symbol in many cultures, such as the Aztecs and the Incas.

DA:

What you're saying is fascinating because many of the most important moments in human history are centered on the rising and falling of the sun, and that was a structure that sustained life. At some point, with the harnessing of electricity, that changed; and suddenly our lives shifted, and we're able to see at nighttime and participate in different worlds and live in other timecodes.

We're able to read at night to entertain ourselves in darkness. We're able to block out the sun and still survive, and that ushers in a new era of existence and creation.

Electricity brought the creation of more of a synthetic form of life. A work I made, titled *New Era*, explores the history of cell phone technology and its pioneer, the American inventor and engineer Martin Cooper. The work is guided by Cooper's statements and stories as he recounts his invention of the cell phone and his thoughts on the future. It reflects on the technological ambivalence of contemporary culture while raising philosophical questions about the challenges of communication and complete connectivity.

I tracked Cooper down and filmed him talking about why he invented the wireless phone. In some ways, *NEW ERA* is a companion piece to *Wilderness* because it was almost like a kind of thought poem of the idea of creating a more connected world; and his desire was to restore a more untethered nomadic life and to bring back nomadism so we can wander, but at the same time the exact opposite also happens.

Everybody's completely connected and cannot escape this connectivity. One of my favorite moments of being with Martin was when I asked him about the very first wireless phone call ever made and he said: "It was in New York City, and I had gathered some press to show them this historic moment. I rented a hotel room on Broadway in Midtown Manhattan, but the press people didn't believe me. They thought it was a scam; they said: 'Martin, we don't believe you. You're going to have to take this cell phone invention down to Broadway and make your call there so we know it's not a trick.'" So he goes down to Broadway holding this giant phone, and he makes the first cell phone call in history. He dials the number, and a male voice answers on the other line, and Martin says: "Hi, this is Martin Cooper." And the man on the other side says: "Why are you calling me?" And then Martin says: "Because this is the first cell phone call in history." And then the other guy says: "Ahhh... I'm trying to invent that too. You beat me."

Martin had called his rival competitor at Bell Labs who was working to claim that he had invented this first wireless phone. I thought that was so strange because, instead of calling the person you love, you call your competitor—it goes back to a raw human nature. Right after he makes the call—he's still holding the phone—he steps out onto Broadway, and a taxi almost hits him. I think it's a complete foreshadowing of our modern condition.

SF:

This invention made possible a new way of communicating and brought us to our current era where we can connect with lightning speed. This technology has also led us to profound changes in the speed and the way we communicate. What do you think about these rapid changes, and how does it affect how you make art?

DA:

Yes, but maybe that also alludes to what happens with technology. There are often three chapters with each innovation: The first chapter is the unknown, the second chapter is the shock of the new—this new object in our lives with novel qualities—and in the third chapter, the technology and innovation becomes invisible because it becomes one with us and an extension of us. For example, if I said to you today something like "there's no more electricity," we wouldn't know what to do because we're so reliant on it. But if it was a hundred years ago, we'd say:

“What electricity?” So I think it’s kind of interesting how we simultaneously author the future but also don’t have a voice in that future. Like there’s no choice in Germany if you’re going to accept the web or VR or AI. It just appears; and you read the news, and there’s a new headset by Apple.

BB:

Perhaps ten years from now, we’ll be sitting in a virtual conference room with our avatars, working together on this exhibition hanging a digital show. What do you think about that?

DA:

For me, I think art can use technology in the service of communicating or expressing a certain story or narrative, but I don’t think art *is* technology. I believe there’s a huge difference; and in many ways, I love the rawness of an incredible story and how it can be unpredictable. I love the energy of the language of images that take me to places I’ve never been. So I don’t want to surrender that to an algorithm which just gives me what it thinks I want. I still want that beauty, violence, and friction in the art that I’m attracted to.

The idea of speed is really one of the great subjects of the 21st century. How do we find ourselves in harmony, and when do we find ourselves in discord? When are we in synchronicity with all that surrounds us, and what other times are we desperately leaving behind?

Art is one of the tools we have to sculpt time, to create experiences that are highly concentrated and dense, or other moments that are open and infinite.

BB:

Are these ideas of friction or fragmentation the reason why you use mirrors in your sculptures and installations?

DA:

I first became interested in reflectivity as I was looking for a way to put the viewers inside my films, and I started thinking that maybe I could draw the viewers into the work through their reflection: The viewers could become like a living film. They would suddenly become the subject of the work.

Some of these sculptures draw on the language of cinema. When you find yourself watching a film, you’re following a story. That story seeks to make you believe it, and then you fall into it. At one point when I was working on a film, I started thinking, what if the viewers could become the subject of the work? What if the viewers were able to see themselves as the subject of the film? And that led me to make the mirrored sculptural works. They reflect the viewers and insert them into the works, so that they *become* the narrative.

I’m very interested in how the viewer can navigate and *become* that work. How can you go beyond the passive role of a work of art as something that you simply consume? Instead, I am attracted to finding different ways for the viewer to really merge with the work. That space is

very open right now. We are living in a time of exploration. What is the screen world, and what is the physical world; where does one end and the other begin?

When we look at art, perhaps we're looking for a return to the real. Maybe we want to return to the tactile and to break the screen, to move past the walls, and to go inside the idea itself and merge with it.

I think that idea migrated into larger pieces like *Mirage*. With *Mirage*, I started exploring the idea of the physical landscape itself. I wanted to create a living sculpture; and with *Mirage*, this sculpture was in the form of an ordinary, single-story house that's reflective inside and out and functions like a hologram inserted into the landscape where it also becomes the landscape... and disappears.

BB:

Yes, it disappears completely. It merges with the landscape.

DA:

Mirage embraces time, it is a work of art that's made to change; I wanted something that was out in the wild desert or in the snow-covered mountains, a work that had no security. It was completely open to anyone and everything. The viewers could author their own experience and use the work as an activator to perceive the world around them in a heightened way.

My artwork is a continuum; different works create different explorations into that idea. Some works use moving imagery, sound, or architecture, and some are happenings. They're all part of a larger conversation.

BB:

In your video installation *migration (empire)*, wild animals or nature reclaim the spaces occupied by humans. It seems to be a world without humans.

DA:

With *migration*, I was interested in how we, as a society, have built a man-made repetition across our amazingly diverse natural landscape. In the hotel rooms in *migration*, you find a sense of sameness: the same room and the same placement of the phone and plastic-wrapped glass. And in a sense, we are everywhere and nowhere when we occupy these spaces.

The animals engage with the constructed environments according to their primal instincts, reflecting a sense of deep history and ecology. *migration* focuses on the landscape and animals that existed before human habitation and which remain in contrast to the repetition of the contemporary built landscape.

I wanted *migration* to have two separate storylines simultaneously: one dealing with this modern landscape of hotels and highways, and the other strata being this sense of deep geology and

history, and exploring what was there before there were any humans, much less a city or a town.

Migration is not controlled or directed. In the work, you see some creatures that are violent and confident, and they do what they want, like the western mountain lion. They'll shred the lamp and rip the bed apart. On the other end of the spectrum, you might find jack rabbits or a deer that are timid and fearful, who recede back into the shadows.

BB:

Many of your projects take place in non-museum spaces, many of which you have realized in nature, such as *Mirage*, *Station to Station*, *Underwater Pavillons*, and *New Horizon*, a mirrored hot air balloon. What is the meaning of museums for you? Do you think they are still relevant, or do they need to change?

DA:

Works of art can take us outside of what is familiar to us, outside of our comfort zone. They can allow us to have license to explore and discover, and this is incredibly valuable. There are no limitations; art shouldn't only be in a contained vessel, such as a traditional white room with climate-controlled air and artificial light. Art can operate in a much larger way, and it can create new directions.

SF:

Can you tell us why you chose a multi-screen architecture for your video installations? In *migration (empire)*, it's three freestanding billboards slightly offset, one behind the other; and in *Wilderness*, it's multiple screens floating in the round, suspended from the ceiling.

DA:

With my works, I'm interested in the de-material. I'm interested in lightness, in change. I often find that installations, performances, moving images, or sound have an inherent malleability. I'm attracted to that flexibility. I like to create installations that can be seen from the outside or the inside; it's immersive, and it really has no beginning or end. It's a continuum.

SF:

The perceived acceleration of the world seems to be a social problem. There's a theory by Hartmut Rosa, a German sociologist, that slowing down is not the solution, but resonance is, and to be in resonance with something is to be immersed. What do you think? In your sculptures *All doors open* and *3 Modern Figures*, the negative aspects of today's communication possibilities also become obvious: the fatigue caused by acceleration and the lack of interaction in people's communication. What do you want to encourage the viewer to do?

DA:

It is a small body of work that I've been working on for the past few years. In *3 Modern Figures (don't forget to breathe)*, for example, three figures are dispersed throughout a space—a woman is standing, another woman is leaning, a man is on the floor.

Each of the figures is holding a phone; however, there is nothing there where the actual phones would be. The phone has been removed from the sculpture; there's no longer color, texture, or recognition in the faces. The forms become vessels of moving light. We have become vessels of information reflecting the acceleration of information that passes through us. Words, images, fragments, and stories race through our bodies and our minds. This work becomes a modern landscape of the individual.

In these works, there is sound: You hear human voices, overtones, frequencies. The sounds are a vocal composition that I created. Each sound is sung with layers of different individuals singing aural tones and washes.

The entire work becomes a choreography of light and sound moving through the figures. At times it separates, at times it synchronizes. The specific work, *3 Modern Figures (don't forget to breathe)*, was an attempt to explore how individuals inhabit the modern landscape, a landscape moving at the speed of light.

BB:

The theme of communication runs throughout the exhibition. There are two other sculptures that relate to it: *twilight* and *Crossing the Border*. *twilight* is almost a relic from a bygone era when time and communication were defined differently. The younger generation is unlikely to recognize this object as a tool of communication. Yet, the icon of the telephone is still the telephone receiver.

DA:

In human history, the early 20th century brought us the mechanical revolution and moved us into mechanical reproduction and now the digital era. At this moment, we're questioning what is real and what is not, what is physical and what is not.

When you mentioned technology and communication, we have voted for what we have around us, whether it's passively or actively. We've chosen to support companies by buying certain products, to choose how much transparency or opacity we want in our lives. That has created a rapidly changing environment. We should not forget that we have voices; we have the right to choose and to say no.

I want to use the technology in service of the ideas I'm exploring. That has created some very interesting collaborations and crossovers. I'm not really interested in having an work of art defined by the medium it's made with. The ideas and questions should always be at the forefront.