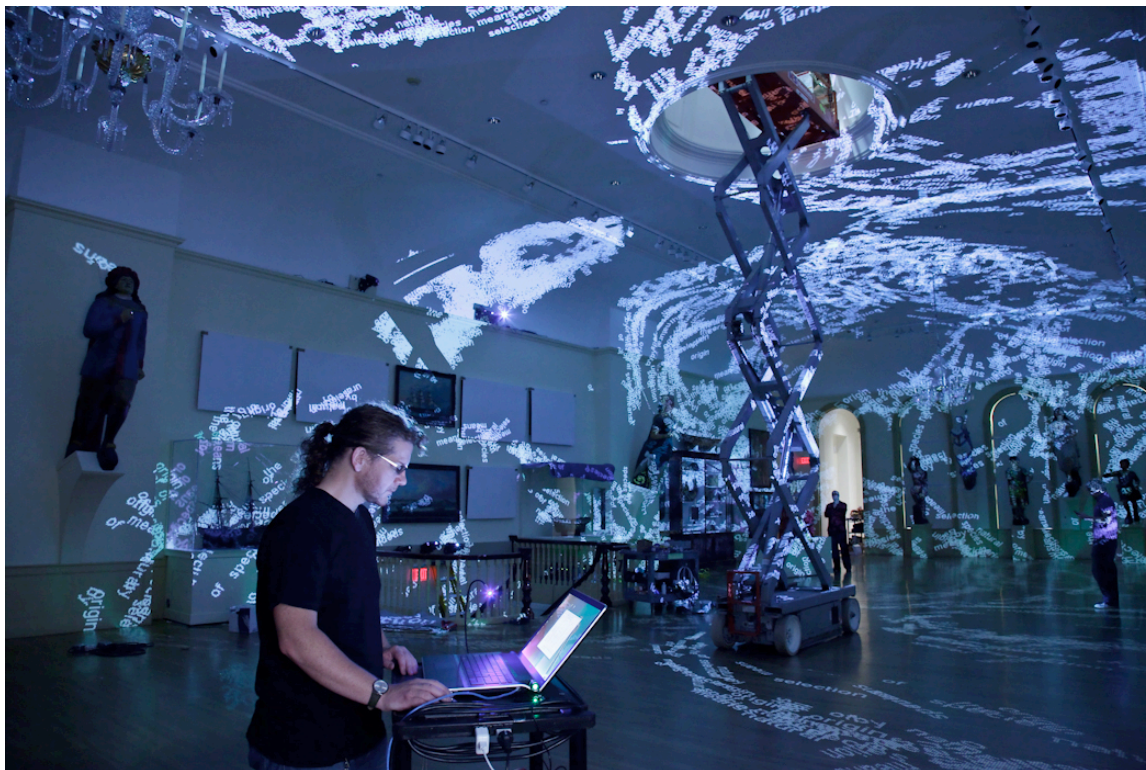


FREE **Nº 001** PORT

Charles Sandison



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--Charles Sandison, inaugural artist for FreePort, PEM's newest contemporary art initiative

The man behind the curtain

Charles Sandison's teachers didn't know he had dreadful eyesight until he was eight years old. "I didn't know I had bad vision. I couldn't communicate that," he says. Instead, he bluffed his way through class and gravitated toward drawing, painting and computer programming. Now he's bespectacled and internationally renowned, creating projections of words around the world and, just for us, inside East India Marine Hall.

What makes you an artist?

I was born one. There was no other option.

What attracted you to graphics and words?

My relationship with language has been distorted from an early age. When my teacher would hold up flashcards over her head, they were almost like my installations, a word floating in space that had a life of its own, a thing of mystery and a certain elitism, something the rest of the class could understand but I couldn't because I couldn't see clearly. I've always thought language was like an animal in its own right. It did things that were separate from its use value. I used to lie awake at night thinking that the words were going to get me; the words were out there.

What schooling did you have?

At 18 I went to Glasgow School of Art. My dream was to be an impressionist painter simply because my local library in Wick had an art shelf with about three art books on it — one on Monet, van Gogh and Salvador Dali. That was my sum experience. I thought, OK, I'll be an impressionist. I was only at school for a few weeks when I realized that all the vacancies for impressionists had been filled.

What attracted you to FreePort?

I've made my fair share of works in contemporary art museums, cubes with white walls. I enjoyed that experience and it bought me a little bit of credibility to begin to pick and choose projects that came my way. I was traveling to interesting places all around the world to do my contemporary art exhibitions. I'd spend a week in a dark place not having seen or made any connection to the place. The contemporary art world was a bubble exactly the same in Madrid, New York, Berlin. Where's the fun in that? You end up making art about art. You regurgitate the structures. I decided that I would focus on projects that brought me out of the white cube of the contemporary art space and into the kind of places that I liked to visit as a 10-year-old. I would basically get lost in museums and I grew up on a diet of what I couldn't handle academically. I just liked to see the stuff. I still have a connection to it.

I've made a conscious effort to take projects that have brought me into contact with local culture. The stranger the better, from the catacombs in Paris to the Colosseum in Rome. Some of these works weren't for public consumption. I knew the director, who knew somebody else, who for one night allowed me to project in the Colosseum when nobody was there. It was a way to have this hands-on connection, to bring 21st-century technology into contact with 50 BC architecture. I projected a poem by Rilke. Don't ask why.

What rewards do you get?

The construct of FreePort suits somebody like me because it brings together multiple strands: the lives of the artists, their experience, the lives of the subjects that they identify with, the collection and the museum and the lives of the people they met there. I have a new friend in Barbara Kampas in the Phillips Library. I had a

wonderful dinner with Henry Rutkowski the PEM electrician. He loves history. Bob Monk, the head of facilities, is a master carpenter. The similar people I've met in Paris and the relationships at every level are more conducive in this kind of institution than the white box of a contemporary gallery.

Why are you projecting other people's words onto a wall?

The job of the artist is not to invent something new but to reveal what already surrounds us. The job of the artist is to remind people of the everyday and the ordinary, to renew what is taken for granted, to remind people of their ability and their capacity to think and to feel, to work things out for themselves, to express the idea that everybody is intelligent and everybody has a responsibility to their own intelligence. Those are my key motivations.

I believe that these projectors are like flashlights for me, and I'm revealing, shining them on the walls and revealing the voices of the people who used that hall or had a connection and passed through that hall. I believe that when they spoke those words, the words didn't disappear. They stayed there in the space. They crept into the corners and echoed backward and forward until they got fainter and fainter. Particle physics says yes, they're still there. Call it morphic resonance if you want. My job as an artist is, through the use of my tools — computers and digital technology — to reveal something very organic, very human. That's the metaphor. It's not scientifically proven, but this is what artists can do very well. They can move between fields. Between physics, and science, and mathematics and human behavior, cultural history, and go backward and forward between them and nobody says you can't do that because you haven't written a paper on it. People say, "They're artists, just let them get on with what they do." That freedom allows us to make very powerful, practical connections. I think artists have a reputation of being somehow romantic. But artists are inherent problem solvers. Most of the time they set up the problem themselves and then answer them.

What kind of problems?

For this project, I needed to hire a four-meter-deep diving pool to get the movement of figures swimming underneath water so I could write a program that simulated that. One day I woke up and said to my wife, who's also an artist, "I know I can use a computer program to model 3-D figures, but it's not the same as getting the feel for the movement." I needed the pool. I wanted the word structures to coagulate into the thin outline of a figure moving through a volume of water like the little mermaid who dissolves at the end of the story into sea salt. I like the idea that these words become like human forms then fade out again. It's not so much the shape of the people but the way the body moves under water and floats. If I thought about it six months ago I would have hired a team of divers and got underwater cameras. Very luckily the pool was closed to the public for the holidays. I got models together. The hardest part of the project was finding the right color swimming costume that wouldn't show up when I made some processing. At the end of the day I could turn the swimmers into a white blob for reference for the program. We spent most of the

morning going from shop to shop. We found ladies swimming costumes, but do you know how hard it is to find a pair of yellow swimming trunks for a guy?

What inspires you?

A lot of inspiration for my work comes from existing structures. I walk through the forest and I watch some ants walking across the forest floor. If I was a lyrical poet, I'd go home and write a poem about ants walking through the forest, and the sunlight and the water. Instead, I want to get my computer and I want to write an ant simulation. I pick somebody up from the local station and I see people getting off the train. And I see that's the anthill, how they follow the same path every day. So then I draw a bridge between trains, human beings and ants and I combine those two unrelated things. But then the computer allows me to investigate parallels, to visualize disrelated concepts and come up with a holistic view of disrelated parts that are in pre-set patterns in this world, predetermined structures that govern who we are and who we become. If we understand them, we'll be able to understand how to make this a better world and live in it peacefully and productively.

How does your program work?

I tend not to tell people the technique. It destroys the magic. It becomes a very nerdy exercise in C++. It turns them off. It might also be private, top secret. I spent 25 years developing some of this code and how it's done. The mechanics, it's like those dreams of being naked in school, it's horrible for me to write about it. I want people to imagine that these words fly off the pages, with no manipulation. Like the wizard of Oz, like the man behind the curtain, I think artists have a responsibility to stay firmly behind the curtain as to how they present their work.

What does the world look like in your head?

I see a form of synesthesia. Basically, what you see in East India Marine Hall is how I visualize the world. It's the same way the painter gets used to walking through the landscape and seeing everything in terms of color and shape, form and volume. I do the same with architecture and language and structure. I read a street sign or advertising logo and I mentally project it somewhere else. I walk into the Grand Palais with its huge glass ceiling, and you just whisper and it bounces around. I watch couples speaking and see the conversation float above their heads and go up into the rafters. It sounds like a very mystical thing but it's not. It's the practicality of what you do in your work.

Do you prefer ephemeral art to permanent expressions?

I've always wanted to surround people with art. When I painted and I completed a canvas, I enjoyed the process of painting but could never live with the things I created. I was heavy when I went back into the studio and saw the things I'd made six months ago. I thought, this is nonsense, this is unsuccessful painting. So in graduating to photography, a lot of the work happens in the environment. The images that you make can be snapshots but you're making images as fast as you think. You don't have the weight of materiality around you. You don't have to go out and buy a canvas and get paint. But again, the process of the alchemy, of black-and-

white photography, is you process the film, pictures emerge out of nowhere, and then I get stuck with a portfolio of pictures I can't really live with.

When did you choose programming?

Toward the end of my education, I was visiting my parents' house and found the first computer I had when I was 12 years old. I'm a child of the computer revolution, when computers first entered the home. It was tiny, 1K of memory, black-and-white graphics. In those days you couldn't go to the store to buy software; you had to write it yourself. If you wanted to do anything interesting, you had to imagine. You didn't have graphics per se, so "x" becomes an alien, a little dot is a bullet, the letter A is a human.

When I first went to art school I left the computer back at home. I didn't see a parallel between being an artist and writing programs. But in the last weeks of my education, I had all of the critical stuff and the confidence to be an artist and the desire to continue, but I didn't have a brush. I didn't have a medium. I found this computer and blew off the dust. It came back really fast. I began to program and I haven't stopped.

A lot of the aesthetic that comes to the work comes from that. Every artist has to have a love-hate relationship with the tools they use. You try to resist being completely seduced by the medium. You shouldn't have too good a time when making art, but maintain some criticality, ask how the medium informs the things we're doing.

I kept this simple approach to graphics, especially as computers got more powerful. I didn't want to be an advert. As 3-D graphics get more detailed and more lifelike, I could easily fill the room with hyper-realistic representations of sailors running around. But I try to keep it essential, a reductive process, to not distract people, to not have it be a Disney side show. I prefer people to be coming at something from almost a little bit of a retro position. It makes them a little more open to what they're seeing. It makes it a little bit more magical rather than tying everything up. Television and cinema do a much better job of that. I don't consider it video art. For me it's painting in space, bringing forward what already exists, defining elements in the architecture.

How did you get involved using computers as a medium?

Computers were very expensive in those days. Early works were old computers taken from flea markets that were probably nicked from some poor kid's bedroom. I bought 10 and was able to make one work. Earlier works are screen-based works. The same meditative feeling I had when I was painting existed when I wrote programs. I was able to transform the ideas in my head, which I guess are electrons moving through the synapses of the brain, and turn them into muscle movements that operate hand-eye coordination called typing. Then the code appeared on the screen. The picture inside my head appeared on the computer screen. That's it. That's my thing. It was always there. It's not like one day I decided to be a media

artist. A bunch of artist of my generation were destined, due to the fact that every artist responds to the pulls and medias of their time, some of us would forge a way using this medium.

Why PEM's East India Marine Hall?

When someone says, "Here it is, take your pick," the head mentally starts to look around the space. How high is the ceiling? How do people move through? Do we create a new space? How much license will the museum give me to impact the collection? That's all done in five minutes. It's like being a pinball around the building. It was just overwhelming. There's so much stuff. Everything is wonderfully curated and presented. Normally I pride myself on being able to very quickly determine. I came prepared. I knew about the collection and areas of specialism and interest. I know it's a good collection because it wasn't easy for me. It was only when I found this calm spot that I could stop and take a breath. What's going on there is very different from the rest of the spaces, and there's nothing on the floor. I thought about the Atrium but it's so new, a bit too fresh, a lot of light that would make it hard to project.

How did you react when Contemporary Art Curator Trevor Smith first described FreePort?

What's that saying, old rope for money? I know Trevor from his work in the field. We took the ferry from Salem to Boston and he flipped up his laptop and said I have to give this FreePort presentation tomorrow to some other people. It was his chance to practice, to appeal to people who aren't experts in contemporary art. At the end I was about to say, "Can I invest? Can I become a benefactor of FreePort, please?" Trevor's fantastic, a broker of images and ideas. He works on a global scale and pushes ideas around. He could say anything and I'd be inspired. He knows that that in its very essence is FreePort. You get people on site and open doors that normally remain closed or are half open. You walk a very delicate journey between the eggshells that lie in any institution, especially when you're introducing something new.

Does the PEM project influence others?

I'm doing five or six different installations around the world and they all speak to each other. This work is already a network of other pieces in my head and underway in other locations around the world. Back in Paris in March, in the Musée du quai Branly, I was installing there at three o'clock in the morning. I've sent home all the exhausted technicians. I've already envisioned the Marine Hall and I'm thinking about Salem and water and courage and whoa, that's the wrong work! If you're dealing with living artists, it's a messy, plastic thing. So some of what will manifest itself in this work in a way has already appeared in Paris.

Is there pressure in being the first FreePort artist?

Quite the opposite. Trevor blended the works together. With my show still running, the next [Marianne Mueller] is coming in. People have the luxury of seeing two responses. It's a clever overlap. That takes the pressure off the artist. On one hand,

you have the honor of being in a solo show, the first is even better. But having somebody come in after you makes it less lonely. It's not all about me. A group show, but not quite.

How do you want people to process your art?

I don't believe you can create a dialogue unless you get them into the space with some magical sensibility. I want the work to go in and up the spine. Then the head starts working. I want them to be in the space for 10 minutes and not know why they're there. You step from the reality of the museum into something else. Then you're kind of out of your head for a little bit, but it's not uncomfortable I hope. It's OK to be there. No one's saying here's contemporary art and you have to have an opinion. I'm not interested in contemporary art, but having this fantastic privilege to visualize my ideas and learn more about the universe I live in. I'll leave it to art critics and historians to put a label on it.

How do people react to your installations?

My work isn't complete until the viewer is inside the space. Some people try and catch the words and hold them on their body. They rub them in. But that's what all of these objects in a museum do. They project words and history onto people. They continue to resonate. And when someone comes back when they're 50, they bring back that memory and put it beside the object. They see the Rhode Island Red (rooster in East India Marine Hall) as a 12-year-old and come back when they're 50. They bring back that memory, and stare at it again (with the words from the installation streaming over its body), after having been through relationships and divorces, marriage and death, and they measure their experiences against it. I want to bring that experience alive, make it palpable to people for a few moments.

Interview conducted by Lisa Kosan, director of editorial and design. A condensed version appears in the November/December 2010 issue of Connections magazine.