

PART 1

FEMALE 1

—wright, and his lecture is called “Phenomenal Art: Form, Idea, and Technique.” James Seawright was born in 1936 in Jackson, Mississippi. He was educated at the University of Mississippi. He came to New York in 1960, and for two years he studied structure at the Art Students League. Since 1963, he’s been associated with the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center. In 1966, he presented a one-man show of electronic sculpture at the Stable Gallery in New York, and he is at present on the faculty of the School of Visual Arts in New York. [Herthouth Noon?], a lady interested in Mister Seawright’s lecture, telephoned the publicity office of the Guggenheim Museum where I work, asking to what period phenomenal art belonged, [00:01:00] and I am ashamed to say that I was unable to answer her question, so I asked Mister Seawright himself. Mister Seawright said that “phenomenal art doesn’t belong to any period, really, nor does it describe one,” and he added that he’d never liked the title of his lecture anyway. (laughter) “Phenomenal art,” he said, “is going to be about my own work, because I am not prepared to talk about anyone else’s.” Ladies and gentlemen, James Seawright. (applause)

JAMES SEAWRIGHT

Well thank you. I’d like to talk about certain, some aspects of a kind of work that I do, and which a lot of other people I think are doing now, and it’s a type, or it’s an attitude about [00:02:00] work, or it’s something that I think is going to, sooner or later, become predominant in the concern of artists. I’ll try to substantiate such a rash claim as I go on, but first I would like to clear up a little bit about the phenomenal art business of the title. I simply appropriated this term and mean it to describe approximately a class of works which, of themselves, undergo changes, actual changes in the passage of time.

Now, I think you should distinguish between the class of works which seem to produce phenomena, which are actually the result of viewers movements with respect to the piece, or some other change of relationship, or perhaps the phenomena are the result of perceptual illusions in the viewer. [00:03:00] Now this is a very broad category, and I think actually could include anything that remotely definable as sculpture as well as a great deal of painting. But I want to distinguish between that and the other category, which is structures, or objects, or whatever you want to call them, that undergo changes of their own, that are inherent in them, that they’re built to physically change, and these phenomena might be the changes of illumination, or changes of spatial relationship, or sound production, that sort of thing. These changes are the phenomena. I don’t wish to suggest that there’s any philosophical notion of phenomenalism involved, nor do I think that any particular aesthetic attitude is a necessary adjunct to considering this type of work. As [00:04:00] far as I’m concerned my own work produce phenomena, and I am interested in the form and structure through which these phenomena are organized, and that the origin of the ideas which underlie the phenomena and the method of production and control of the phenomena.

Now, let me begin with a specific example. Let’s consider, or — well first, let me say that some of the examples are on film. Actually, I didn’t anticipate having the actual sculptures in the back of the auditorium, or in some cases, that there is a kind of isolation of external influences so that you can perhaps see, as an example, what I’m trying to illustrate in the film a little bit better in the piece itself, but after the lecture, if you like, please examine the pieces. The first [00:05:00] example I would choose then would be, let us consider a structure made of actual lamps. Now, whatever properties this structure may have, we have to add to it the properties of the phenomena produced by turning the lights on and off, turning them on and off in binary form, either on or off, or intermediate levels of illumination. Now, since these changes of necessity occur in the passage of time, it’s possible to make an analogy, I think, between the totality of the phenomena, and let’s say, a piece of music, or a performance of a piece of music. You can’t carry this analogy too far, and in the case of, I think, a sculptor who builds a device which produces some kind of time-dependent [00:06:00] phenomena, he’s going to probably solve the problems related to it in an entirely different way because he will be using, more likely, mechanical means to control the lamps, or whatever the parts are that give rise to the phenomena.

Now, I wouldn’t rule out, for instance, the possibility of having an orchestra, or a group of people that operate the thing. But it would never occur to me, for example, to adopt this method of controlling a device, but would use a mechanism. Now, more significantly than, let’s say, the use of mechanism to control these phenomena, is that one can use automatic mechanisms which have properties of a certain remoteness, or distance, from your invented ideas of what the phenomena you [00:07:00] wish to present will appear to be. For instance, you can compose a pattern of phenomena — light illumination changes, this sort of thing. If you have a mechanism to produce it, or you have to instruct the mechanism how to do it, you have to be able to describe what you want in language intelligible to mechanism, and this requires a consideration of the phenomena you want in a way not generally, I think, experienced by artists before say, the last two decades. A good example of how this affects another art, music, for example, is that composers have come to rely on notating a score, or by means of symbols which actually carry a tremendous amount of information. And [00:08:00] through the evolution of music, composers, I think, well, I don’t mean that they forget it. They’re certainly aware of it, but there is a tendency to think of the symbolic representation of an event as an essentially simple instruction, and it really isn’t. It’s perhaps more complex than anyone could imagine.

Now, when you want to produce a piece of electronic music, you’re no longer able to rely on a performer’s understanding of what that symbol means, and all of the ways his body and his instrument will react when he acts in a certain way, you have to tell the machinery exactly what to do. Now, for this reason, this is the only reason I think it might be desirable, say, to produce works of art in which phenomena other than sounds, or phenomena in addition to sounds, are the [00:09:00] content of the work, and to have this controlled by other persons is because you would then be able to utilize the intuitive understanding of these persons who were controlling the thing. This would act as somewhat an extension of your own hopefully taste, or the particular way you want done might be extremely difficult to explain, but someone else would be able to understand it intuitively. Now, on the other hand, if you use a mechanism to produce a series of changes, once you learn how to make the mechanism, or you figure out what’s necessary in how you shape the information into a form that the mechanism can understand, you

see that there is a certain equivalency between the body of information that you put into the mechanism as a program or an instruction, and the [00:10:00] phenomena that are produced.

Now, this equivalency, well it's like a transformation of one kind of information into another. Now, you can look for bodies of information, let's say, as a way of finding things, finding of bulk kind of form, or a bulk kind of performance, and then attempt to structure it, rather than try to compose in advance every detail of the performance you want to have. Now, it seems to me that in this kind of problem is the essence of what is natural to the method. Performance-type arts generally are produced in a situation where you come expecting to see a performance of something — you sit down, you see the beginning of it, what happens [00:11:00] in between and the end, and there's a certain convention associated with that, because you have to coordinate so many different people's activities to bring this about, that this sort of situation evolves. But if a performance of some kind of phenomena, whether it be music or other, can be done automatically, perhaps there are inherent advantages in the automatic process; perhaps we should look for an aesthetic, or perhaps we should try to think about it in terms of controlling these automatic processes, or somehow establishing criteria for judging how well these phenomena constitute a statement or a gesture.

Now, let me show this first film. This is just about a hundred feet of close-up of the two little pieces in the back, and here, [00:12:00] the actual phenomena of the lights going on and off represents a direct transformation of the behavior of a mechanism, which has an inherent property of complex motion. It's a cyclical thing. It takes, oh, 12 or so hours to go around through the whole cycle. But within what it does, there's a certain dynamic variation; there's a certain gross pattern of how soon activity follows after inactivity — this sort of thing. We'll run the film now, the first section. [00:13:00] (pauses) [00:14:00] (pauses)

This is actually three separate shots of the two different pieces, just taking whatever they happened to be doing at the moment. (pauses) [00:15:00] (pauses) Okay. Now, that, it seems to me that one of the crucial issues in working in a medium where time is significant, I mean, other than something like the decaying, the erosion or the corrosion of bronze, or something like that, I mean a significant intended change, a [00:16:00] change that's unmistakably intended as a gesture, as a phenomenon that is the content of the work, or at least is a large part of the content, what one of the crucial issues is, that I believe that you're obligated to exert some kind of control over it.

Now, whether you're aware of it or not, whether you decide to, say, let the things be switched on and off at random, let them all be on, let them all be off, you have to make some decision about it, and in considering the various possible ways that it can be done, this represents one approach. Now, there is involved a certain sacrifice in control over the total phenomenon that's produced, because if you start with a mechanism that has certain properties, once you begin to tamper with some part of it — change the length of the [00:17:00] linkage, or the number of teeth on a gear — you affect the whole thing. But, depending on the way it changes, the kind of relationships that there are in it, or I suppose ultimately the mathematical expression of it, in whatever terms it can be analyzed, you do have some power to shape this. This can be increased by compounding, or bringing together several self-sufficient processes of information, transformation into phenomena. There's another kind of a secondary effect that I think noteworthy, and that is that I

was quite surprised making this type of thing at first to discover that the mechanism that produced the phenomena was in some ways, considerably more interesting than the phenomena themselves, just the sheer kinetic [00:18:00] behavior of it, the little linkages going all over the place.

So, this, I believe to be an illustration, or to me, it's an illustration of the fact that you simply cannot come from the outside with an idea and try to apply it to, or to bend the technological resources that you may have or you may be able to acquire, to suit it. Or, the more I work with it, the more I feel that the ideas grow out of an understanding of the processes. How much of this understanding may be fallacious is impossible to say. The next example, though, is a piece in which a deliberate effort was made to use several different independent programming devices, whose information content is directly transformed into phenomena. There's at [00:19:00] least one relationship or subsystem in it in which sensors, acting as I suppose as simulacra of human sensory systems, detect or note information which one set of phenomena constitute, and retransform it into something else. Now, since you are able to witness this process, hopefully there's a reinforcement of what you would get otherwise. Now, this also is the big piece in the back that makes the sounds. If we could see the second film, then. (pauses) [00:20:00] (pauses)

Now, one thing which might not be obvious is that the sounds that the piece produces are electronically generated in this moving form on the left, and they are more or less equivalent to what light is picked up by the little black spots that are sort of swinging around over there, as [00:21:00] they scan this bank of lamps. Now I say approximately — you certainly have no way of predicting, in a practical way, where they're going to be pointing at any given time — if you bend one photocell a little bit too much, it sees another lamp, and all that — but it's quite interesting how well that the quality, or how well the character of the sound can be made to seem to correspond or to seem to enhance the idea of cause and effect, which, I suppose it really is an illustration of. (pauses) [00:22:00] (pauses) [00:23:00] (pauses)

Okay. Now, one or two things I'd like to go back and reiterate. I'm very much concerned that I get across some kind of an idea that I have about this interrelationship between the form, and the idea, and the technique in this special way that relates to this kind of work. Now I certainly [00:24:00] can see that this is probably a universal thing that's always been possible to say about art, but the time dependency, once you're concern is with the phenomena, it's almost inevitable that the forms evolve for treating the phenomena, or organizing them or structuring them, will be analogous to those which have been evolved in a much older performance-type art such as music.

It's really hard to say where form starts and idea begins in this area, because the necessity of organizing the thing in a cyclical way takes away certainly some element of development, or [00:25:00] some element of possible development, because if you have it around for a long time, you get to know what it does. There are a lot of factors involved here which represent compromises. Once you decide that, all right, I'm going to make something that's going to be a sculpture, and I'll put it in a gallery and people will look at it, you no longer have the ability then to say, “Well, I don't really care what people think about it. It's just, I made it because I like to make it.” But you have to consider that because you run into the most incredible spectrum of reactions from people, and if you more or less commit yourself to producing something which

will capture, or engage the attention of the viewer, you want to make this process as efficient as possible. Well now, people always, there seem to [00:26:00] be reactions like, “How does it work?” or, “To what extent is it necessary to know how does it work?” or, “What is it?” Well, that’s not what it... It’s what it does or what it is, this kind of — so, the reason I’m going into this is that, I’m not trying to so much say that there’s a lot of complicated thing involved here; there are all sorts of techniques that you may not know about, and you’ve got to learn about them in order to know how it works, because I’m not sure that knowing how it works or not knowing how it works is really relevant or not. I mean, I’m sort of isolated from any possibility of guessing because I do know how it works, and to me, I [00:27:00] can’t say whether the idea has come out of knowing how it works, or knowing what process happens to interest me at the moment, and whether or not the idea is really capable of being isolated.

So, this, my anxiousness to get across the idea of this special equilibrium that’s involved — let me try to go and to give you another illustration which — I don’t have a film. Could we see slide six? And leave the lights up the way they are. This piece I think is a better illustration of this interrelationship. Now, let me take about five minutes and go through. [00:28:00] Could we have slide six? Now this is a piece, physically described, it stands about seven feet tall. That hub-looking thing there is actually a cluster of four little motors that have wheels. They’re arranged symmetrically at the vertices of a tetrahedron. The whole thing is supported on a rod from the triangular base. Now, this piece uses little motors that are called selsyns. This motor has the property of turning in a certain direction or a certain amount so as to remain exactly in step with another selsyn to which it’s connected. They’re used as remote indicators. Say if you have a gyroscope in the bottom of a ship, and you don’t want to have to go down there to see which direction the ship’s [00:29:00] heading, you can use a pair of selsyns to translate or to transmit the position of the gyro up to the bridge of the ship with just connections of wire between; there doesn’t have to be a mechanical motion transmitted.

Now, these selsyns, because of the property that they have of transmitting motion electrically, this, as in any motor, the magnetic attraction between the parts of the motor is what is the force that actually moves it, and this is elastic, to a degree, so that if, for instance, a rotor or a wheel having a lot of inertia is attached to one and turned, it’s not going to just stop dead, but it will swing over. Well, this piece grew out of experiments with the little selsyns, and the reason there are four is simply because four is the number that seemed to work [00:30:00] best together before the effect got too weak to run five or six or seven or so. So, certain of the, just the questions of the geometrical organization of it, are affected by the four selsyns. If there’d been three, I think there would have been another direction taken there. The wheels, themselves, represent approaches modified by the nature of the selsyns that have to turn them. They can’t be too heavy, just physically massive, since the shafts of the little motors are very small. A spoked wheel gives the appearance of being quite large without being heavy, et cetera, et cetera.

Now, so far so good. If you turn one, or a breath of air or a touch, the other three try to follow, and they swing past because of the inertia, and there’s a constant shifting, and finally equilibrium comes back. [00:31:00] Now, and once the piece was built to this stage, I began to run into these artifacts of the processes involved, which — well, for instance, these little selsyns were originally intended to be used in aircraft, and in order for them to be small and light, they are designed to use a different frequency of AC power. They use 400-cycle AC. So, in order to run

them, I had to build a 400-cycle power supply. Well, the kind of 400-cycle power supply that's cheapest and simplest to build is only stable if the power demand is constant. Now, with the selsyns, when one is turned and they get out of equilibrium, and what I suppose in kinetic terms, you might say a tension is set up, the power demand increases, and [00:32:00] the power supply frequency changes. As it happens, it rises in pitch, and this happens to be clearly audible because of the slight vibration of all the mechanical parts.

Now, they are very efficient resonators. I mean, at every step, all of this sort of thing, which I certainly could not have imagined in advance would ever be involved, appeared, and it required, I think, a decision to go with it or fight against it. Or, if you make the rods let's say a little bit longer, they might resonate better, the sounds more clearly audible. Suppose the sound had not gone up when there was a tension but gone down. What does this mean in perceptual terms? So, I'm not going into all this to extol the virtues of the piece; that's totally irrelevant to the point. The point is that such a simple thing, really, [00:33:00] is involved in an area of concepts that have to do with this whole issue that I think is central to our times, and that's technology, that there's a difference between the understanding of a process, some technological process, and perhaps anything else. And, I believe that artists, once they are committed to working, or perhaps more aware, or greater exposure, will not be able to resist the power that this medium seems to offer. For instance, [00:34:00] to go back once again to this illustration, it seems my reaction to the piece is that, in a very rudimentary or primitive way, it seems to exhibit what you have to call, metaphorically, let's say, it possesses a certain sensitivity, I mean an actual sensitivity. If you do something to it, it reacts. Reactivity. It possesses a behavior; it possesses an unpredictability, and yet it's just nuts and bolts. So, in order to somehow reconcile the issue I think you have to recognize that there is a kind of an attitude about technological processes that

PART 2

JAMES SEAWRIGHT

— that goes very deep, and I think this is the irresistible attraction of it that will sooner or later influence the arts. Now, let me go on and show you another example. This is another development, sort of. This goes beyond that other piece in that an effort was made here to set up almost an automaton. It, unfortunately, probably goes a little bit too far in being a little anthropomorphic, but I have to defend that on evolutionary grounds, because the kind of engineering that is exemplified in the human body, it's a very efficient way to gather information and to promulgate it, in this next piece. We can take the slide away now, and the next [00:01:00] part of the film, I'll just talk about it while it goes.

It seeks or avoids light, depending on the way it's connected, and the changes which occur in the connections in the circuits in it constitute a program, but on top of this is the unpredictability or the — I don't know that that's really legitimate to call it that, but that there is... Since it's a powerful source of light itself, it will either be frustrating or encouraging its own efforts to move and react to light, and this is apparently or seems to me capable of a certain amount of structuring, [00:02:00] or it's certainly possible to see enormous changes in the overall pattern of

behavior that this piece will exhibit in a room full of people, or at night, or in the daytime, or it's sensitive to environmental influences and particularly people. Now because of this, seeing what it does when people are around it, it may, because a person walks in front of it and it happens to be in a certain mode, it will follow that person around the room with the light. Now, it's impossible not to think that there's some, okay, deliberate effort made for it, this is what it's supposed to do, except that [00:03:00] the next time, it won't follow you around the room.

Now, if your reaction to being followed or not followed may come soon enough to break through the process, or — I mean, people get involved with the thing or they just hate it. There's a range of possibilities that seems — it's not really theatrical in a way because you can't possibly control it, as the artist. You can only set up a generalized set of options, and sort of throw them at the audience, if the audience comes close enough to have them thrown at, and then try to refine what you observed the next time. But this did interest me in carrying this a little further, but first, let me show you a couple of more [00:04:00] slides. Could we see 8, 9, and 10 about 15 seconds apiece? These three pieces all are basically the same. They operate exactly the same way as the one that you just saw in the film, but they have completely different configurations. And when I had them all three together for the first time in the same room, it became quite obvious that whether there were people around or not, there was plenty of interaction between the pieces, and I thought that was very entertaining. (laughter) That's the one in the movie. But the essential features are the same: they produce light and they are sensitive to light, and they have [00:05:00] an unpredictable way of reacting to a feedback of light from what they produced or what they sensed. That one hangs up in the air.

Now, the next thing then I'll talk about is this latest thing I did, not counting the two little pieces in the back, but this was an environment which I was commissioned to design for the Kansas City Performing Arts Foundation, and it consists of a circle of columns, 21 feet across, and within this space, there's a false floor underneath — it's all supporting everything — and in the center is a [00:06:00] control unit. Now, the idea was to bring the viewer into the thing, to try to isolate external environmental influences, and as far as possible, let only the actual movements of the viewer be the information which you were trying to use to transform and then produce phenomena. Now the phenomena sound changes and light changes which appeared in the columns, now a person could come into the thing and he would have or he would move, or his movements would be recorded in the center thing which was a simple digital circuit that did have a memory, the ability to store away these patterns of numbers, and they were then decoded in a manner very analogous to that piece in the back, into electronic sounds. But, you could influence what [00:07:00] was going on, although it wasn't quite clear just how well you could anticipate what effect your actions would have. The longer you spent at it, the more you could figure out what you were doing and what you weren't. Let's see the film of that, the last section of the film. This is very short, I'm afraid.

And this lighting is completely artificial because of the, or necessity of filming it. It would really be almost completely dark. (pauses) [00:08:00] (pauses) Okay. And I have a few slides. Could we go through 14, start with 14 and go through 19 — no, go through 20 but skip 19, about 20 seconds apiece? [00:09:00] (pauses) [00:10:00] (pauses) All right. Now, that really, this is such a very, very rough and crude approach to what I think is possible to do. This just detects whether you pass in front of a photocell. It tells you nothing about a person's reactions, really. It only

tells you where they are. But the possibilities seem to me so incredible, because [00:11:00] the quantity of information that's actually being managed in this thing is quite staggering, and yet it isn't inherently a very expensive proposition. It's something that was totally impossible five or six years ago. There's one thing though that strikes me as being indicative of the difference between, or kind of a warning, a limit about how far you can go in this theatrical direction, and that is that, with this sort of thing, the more people that get in it, the less possibility of any comprehensible understanding of or perception of the phenomena, the less is possible, because really, it only works best with one person, and if there are two people in there, [00:12:00] they have to cooperate, really, in order to enjoy it.

But this communication all has to take place spontaneously. It's like, the more elaborate and complicated the thing, the less, or the less benefit there is in it, or the less there is there for the people, and it's almost a kind of a metaphor of modern life, but I can't see any way to get around it. At any rate, I don't really feel comfortable talking about what I expect people to think, or see, or react to, because I don't have any didactic intent. The involvement in producing the system is the limit of what I believe I can speak [00:13:00] with any accuracy about.

Now, to conclude, I think that the predominance, or my belief that this will come to predominate artists' concern really boils down to the fact that the possibilities are so unlimited, and the only thing that approximates the magnitude of the possibilities is the suddenness with which they've developed. This literally is something that's only become possible in the last five or six years. But the possibilities aren't just possibilities of imagination. That's always been expressible in open-ended terms.

But it's possibilities of control over the physical world, that's what technology gives us, [00:14:00] and yet the technique which this implies is not a technique of manual skills, but a technique of conceptual understanding of all the disciplines that make up technology. Now, for me, it's a continuing problem of trying to learn about something that I wasn't taught, or something that I didn't know I should know about. It means learning, just simply studying all the time in order to find out how something works before you can — I'm not necessarily advocating that people do this, but I think that it's more likely that now people will be thinking of themselves as artists or producing work which they feel is art, who have already these understandings. The proliferation of scientific and technical training that's come about in the last two or three decades is beginning to [00:15:00] produce artists from out of its ranks, rather than through traditional routes.

Well, that's about all I can say. I do, once again, reiterate this idea I have that within this type of approach, as far as the artist is concerned, there is this intimate relationship between the idea and the technique through which it's realized, and even the form, even the organization of the phenomena which constitute the manifestation of the ideas. Would you have any questions? I'll turn these things back on, if you would like to look at them, [00:16:00] but I'll be glad to answer questions.

MALE 1

May I ask, (inaudible) one to the left over here, is that, in the art in that, what — you know, the shape of it, like the shape of [rain?] statue, or [the art?] what it does — you know, if light shines, and what the (inaudible) — wherein lies the art?

JAMES SEAWRIGHT

Well that’s something that I can’t tell you, (laughter) by definition.

MALE 1

I guess [if someone explains it or something?].

JAMES SEAWRIGHT

Yes, people have, (laughter) and I’m not saying that as... I suspect that I, myself, am guilty of assuming that it’s art, because people have said that it is. Now whatever I think about it privately, I [00:17:00] don't think it’s really relevant, whether I think it’s art or not. My job, it seems to me, is to make it, and it seems to be possible for it to be acceptable as art. Beyond that, I don't think I can really say anymore.

FEMALE 1

I’m not clear about the (inaudible) [with substance?] (inaudible) [much better to have?], [that seems to be more?]; is that because of the (inaudible), or is it because of the (inaudible), [beginning?] [handling it further?]?

JAMES SEAWRIGHT

Well, if there are a lot of people, it can just simply become saturated with, well, detections of movement, so that it just simply can’t cope with all the information that’s being fed into it, and that’s a limiting case, but [00:18:00] let’s say there’s one person in there. Well, putting myself in the place of that person, or, I think that what I like to see or what I think would be desirable would be that it produces a certain set of sounds, and I note that there seems to be a correlation between my walking around and it’s making these sounds. So I say, “Let’s see what happens if I stop.” I stop, and it stops. Now, this doesn’t necessarily mean that there was a correlation, but I think there is so, so if I’m interested in it — now, again, I have to use myself. I’m the only accessible audience member, really, and to that degree, I’m concerned with audience reaction only as far as I can understand it myself. So, well, you begin to test it then, if you’re interested. You try to see what the limits are, and the more you fiddle around, the more [00:19:00] you begin to get some kind of idea of what it is, and you begin to get some kind of different attitude about it than you had when you went in. Now, again, from my own point of view, it seems that like having the things around, the longer they are around, the more that you continually change in the way you feel about them. Now, if this, I suppose, is a goal which I have, and if there are two people, it becomes twice as difficult, because you don’t know what you did, whether what you did made it do something, or whether what someone else did. So that’s why I think that it works best when it’s all to one person, and unfortunately, in a gallery, a museum situation, if there are people waiting, if it’s crowded Saturday, it’s like you’ve got 15 seconds, and it just better do something. (laughter) [00:20:00] So, that sort of thing. Yes.

FEMALE 2

(inaudible) [language or?], is there [someone?] [through?] the technology? Otherwise explain how [one of the?] (inaudible) technology dictating the form. Could it also dictate other forms, the same technology?

JAMES SEAWRIGHT

Well, one thing I meant to say which I didn't, just missed, was that I'm talking about the form that underlies the organization of the phenomena, not the physical appearance of it. In fact, I can't really say honestly whether I know what I do think about that, because it's so often that you have to just make arbitrary decisions, that you're going to let this y stick out here instead of out there, when it doesn't really matter in terms of function where it does stick out. And I don't know, I suppose if a lot of people do this kind of work, eventually [00:21:00] some kind of aesthetic will evolve, but at the moment, it's like a kind of an unpleasant reminder that you're still making things according to traditional. Which, I mean it's not unpleasant in the sense that I — it's just that you don't know quite whether you should or not, I mean speaking for myself. But there seems to be lacking any convincing reason for making a thing look one way as opposed to another when your primary concern is with what it's doing, or the functioning of it as a system of almost organic processes. But... Yes, [that?] —

FEMALE 3

[Professor Stalin?] (inaudible) is [horribly upset?], and (inaudible) not want to give (inaudible)?

JAMES SEAWRIGHT

No, the sound, I [00:22:00] meant that, by letting the... Well, in this piece back here, the movements of those linkages constitute a body of information. It would take you a long time to write it all down. Just the way those gears move is a very, very complex and predictable pattern of movement. Now, that's sensed by little magnetic switches and all that, and that's transformed directly into the patterns of lights. Now, the patterns of lights are red in an approximate way by the photocells which control the characteristics of the sounds that are generated, so that there is a cause-effect relationship between the — and the reason for using it, I suppose, is to see if it doesn't, or if it can't reinforce the idea of process, or the idea of functioning that's going on. Your ear is very sensitive [00:23:00] to little nuances of sound. Even the most totally non-musical person can recognize any of thousands and thousands of different gradations of patterns that the sounds make, and if you see clearly that that's related, just related in time with the way the lights change, then that's what I mean. That's the use; the cause and effect is there in an attempt to reinforce this idea of what's going on.

MALE 2

(inaudible) you were talking about [time?], because these [are the differences?] between (inaudible) and this kind of expression [and?] understanding of the (inaudible) [effect?], (inaudible). [Now there really?] (inaudible) you were talking about (inaudible) [00:24:00] [control?] you're talking about [will?] react unpredictably. Now, [if there is?] [something controlled?], then (inaudible), [a prior?] movement from (inaudible), movement (inaudible), right?

JAMES SEAWRIGHT

Yeah.

MALE 2

(inaudible)

JAMES SEAWRIGHT

Well, yes, that’s one of them, but —

MALE 2

[What of the other?]? (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) —

JAMES SEAWRIGHT

Well, I thought you might say, you were about to allude to something about the uncontrolled part, and that, see, is like another even more interesting extension of it, because if you make something that pleases yourself, like a performance, you’re not really utilizing what technological processes lay out in front of you. [00:25:00] You can operate with systems that have limits of uncontrollability, and therefore, you are able to place some kind of structure on a very complex set of events which will transpire, once the thing is finished and placed where someone can see it or not, as the case may be. And this is something that I have no conception of what the limits might be, or what. It’s just, it seems to me just overwhelmingly fascinating, as opposed to having a box with lights in it, and you make a score and you make the lights do that, and that’s a piece, that’s *Light Symphony Number One*. I mean, that’s something that, for that matter, could have been done a hundred years ago with candles. It’s just a question of [00:26:00] convenience and that sort of thing. But the automatic control, the cybernetic kind of conception which relates so many scientific disciplines today is what I think is the thing that is the answer to so many artists, or what they’re looking for, myself included. (laughs) Yeah.

FEMALE 4

Is there any [reform?] in your work? You (inaudible), you are free from artistic [and the?] art influences (inaudible), the form that your work takes, can seem to have some relationship to something other than [pure?] technology, and I just wanted you to comment (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) —

JAMES SEAWRIGHT

Well, see, that’s a very good point, because I can’t — I mean, I can say that these number of [00:27:00] options, as I see it, is this that you could do: you can make something so that it works, first of all. Now if that makes it necessary for it to have any of 10 different shapes, you can choose the shape that looks prettiest, or the shape that looks ugliest, but you simply can’t ignore the issue, because if you do, it won’t work. Things have got to be fastened down some way. You’ve got to make some decision. Now, I don’t really know; it’s just instinctive to react according to what your traditional idea of proportion, and just elementary concepts of design. And then of course, also modifying this is the fact that, when you’re dealing, or you think you’re dealing with a process, you’re trying to make something that [00:28:00] looks like it’s sensing something, well now, what looks like something that’s sensing is almost impossible to avoid helping it along, making it look bug-like, or alert, or this kind of thing. So, I really, I don’t have any pat answer, and I think what I like to think is that I try different approaches to the same thing, looking all the time for the best one. One final thing about that is that, critics have written recently, in fact, one of the people you’ll be hearing in a future lecture, about the possibility of an art without any physical basis whatever, nothing but phenomena. Now, this [00:29:00] certainly

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On the Future of Art: “Phenomenal Art—Form, Idea, and Technique” by James Seawright, 1969

is an ideal, final ramification, but to me, I just can’t somehow ever think that we’ll be able to disregard or to completely do away with the mechanism which produces the phenomena. This is not like not putting it in the closet — you can always do that — but actually producing phenomena without any physical structure, so.

FEMALE 5

(inaudible) [and one piece?] (inaudible), [I mean?] (inaudible)?

JAMES SEAWRIGHT

[00:30:00] May I have the slide of that? That’s slide 13. You can just leave the lights on; it’s a bright slide. Well that was all an idea that just sort of knocked around for so long that I don’t really remember whether it started off as one thing or not, but one key thing which determined the choice of the digit: I mean, this is like telling secrets, but it’s so close to this idea I’m trying to get across, is that “8” is a possible simple figure that can be produced on the screen of a cathode ray tube with very simple circuits. Compared to the problem of producing a “4,” let’s say, it’s at least 10 times easier. Now, that’s kind of an overriding consideration. [00:31:00] (laughter) But this piece, the different, just simply the variants of eight, across the front of it — the last box is a loudspeaker that says “8” every 30 seconds. (laughter) Okay. Somebody here had a question. Yeah.

FEMALE 6

I don’t want to [repeat?] but I’m wondering what do you call (inaudible), especially (inaudible), I was wondering how you’d relate [certain stuff?], (inaudible) perhaps phenomena (inaudible)?

JAMES SEAWRIGHT

Well, I [00:32:00] think I relate very well, and in one sense, that I think that it’s very, very difficult to say what is art and what isn’t, looking at somebody else’s work. The only way I can think that you could make any approximation of what is or isn’t is like if the primary concern is an end result or a product, then it probably isn’t to be regarded as a work of art, but if the primary concern is what goes on during the getting there — just talking about let’s say two machines that you’re comparing: one was built and is alleged to be art, by an artist, and one was built and it’s supposed to produce some kind of plastic part. Well —

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