

under the USCO name rather than as individual artists. Their motto was, We are all one. In a world of simultaneous operations, you do not have to be first to be on top.

USCO utilized unique new techniques for lighting, colors, projections, film, audio, and live performances to create multimedia and environmental art that included installations with slide projections, closed circuit television, oscilloscopes, strobe lights, amplifiers, early IBM computers, and live performances.

This culminated most famously in the expanded Cinema Festival, Timothy Leary's Psychedelic Theater, and the first multimedia disco, Murray the K's World, all of which incorporated immersive technology and ideas, allowing audiences to feel as if they were entering a new immersive world. It didn't hurt that a goodly number among them were probably tripping as well.

They've performed or exhibited at many great museums, universities, and venues, including the Fonabi Museum in Eindhoven, the Walker Art Center, the Whitney, Tate Liverpool, the Pompidou Center, and RISD. And the Esko Church in Garneville, New York, was placed on the National Register of Historical Places. And I first met Gerd in the 20th century.

Born in Germany in 1928, he emigrated with his parents to the United States as a refugee from Hitler in 1936. Gerd and I started crossing paths in New York City in the 1960s. We discovered common ground at a Phil Niblock loft concert in the 1990s. He asked me to write music and sound design for his play.

Lost Cabaret, or Catand Dogastrophic, produced in the 2003 New York Fringe Festival. I asked Gerd to create poetry for a 3D sound work, Sky High. It's an installation work that's been heard in the US and Europe. In 3D, it has vertical sound motion. Here is the stereo mix.

Gerd, welcome to Immerse.

Maija-Leena: I like this one.

Charlie Morrow: Good, I'll keep your remark on there. Bart, keep that in there, we need the fan. Okay. As we talked last night, I'm working on a book called Immerse, and it's about immersive technique, and about how, that is part of

your practice. So I'm asking how you used and thought about immersive technique. And then the second question will be about how you got to that.

Gerd Stern: Well, okay. How I got to that originally had to do with the work of an art historian named Ananda Kumaraswamy, who at the end of his life worked a lot for the Bosnian people, and the museum. He wrote about the artist in traditional society not using his name, not signing things, but being part of the class of people who made things.

I thought about it and I thought how that would work and I coined the term Company of Us, or USCO, U-S-C-O, as a way of getting away from the individual signatures. And having a more community-based collaborative practice in the arts involving more than one person and being immersive in that sense because it was generalized rather than particular.

And we started out basically with three people, but we increased to the point that 15 up to 30 or so people were involved as poets, artists, engineers. All kinds of people who helped with the work, which was multimedia and exhibitions and performances. And USCO, even now, Michael Callahan and I are probably the only people who identify as USCO, but we're still using the label and working on things which are immersive rather than individual.

Charlie Morrow: What year was that you started this? It was really in the early 1960s. 1962, 63. Both in Northern California and in the New York City area.

And our basic headquarters was – and we still own it – this is an old church building in Garnerville, New York in Rockland County. And we're still working on that building and in that building and we have a lot of our artwork there.

Charlie Morrow: From the first question your concept of immersivity beyond the idea of working in a group setting, you were talking about bringing together all the senses and all the media. Would you talk to that?

Gerd Stern: Yeah. We were using everything that we could to gather together in sound, and in images, and even with the oscilloscope images and with electronics of any kind, making a mix rather than a one-at-a-time signal. So it had to do with signal-to-noise ratio.

In a sense, our engineer, Michael Callahan, was really responsible for acquainting me with technical terms; how to identify the idea of a resistor and

a capacitor and get the analog of how that has this kind of a philosophical dimension rather than just a purely technical dimension.

Charlie Morrow: Oh, I like that very much. And what sort of works did you do with those techniques?

Gerd Stern: Well, we started out by using ... I'm a poet, so we were using slides of words. And that was called the Verbal American Landscape. And we had photographers taking single words of advertisements, newspapers, highway signs, and put them in projections, for instance, doing three slides across. At the beginning – this was before carousels – so we were using single-slide projectors, so we'd have that. One person at each of the three and changing images as we went along. We were very lucky when all of a sudden the carousel projector came along. And a patron of ours at the time, Paul Williams, in Rockland County at The Land. Paul at one time owned Black Mountain College where I had a very fast stay.

And later on, a community involving John Cage and M.C. Richards and a lot of people. Stanley van der Beek. So, it grew and became involved with the ability to do things at auditoriums and places and museums and universities where we did multimedia things using many channels, up to four or six channels of sound and many channels of images and slides, and film and video and oscilloscopes.

And it got slightly out of hand for a while. Then finally, we realized that we didn't really want to practice overload. We wanted to practice what was more like spiritual meditation. And we changed it from the Verbal American Landscape to Hubbub, which was a quotation of Martin Luther's. And finally to We Are All One, which was our final many, many years of performances.

Charlie Morrow: Quite beautiful. Did you do projections outdoors on buildings or nature?

Gerd Stein: Once in a while, but that wasn't our main scene. I think we mostly did projections inside auditoriums and all kinds of indoor spaces and theaters. We're sponsored usually by an institution like a museum or a university or some kind of not-for-profit.

And we schlepped a tremendous amount of equipment of our own around in a Cadillac we had and a truck. We did it all over the country – east and west and midwest as USCO.

Charlie Morrow: Fantastic. As I understand it, you were working on the notion of providing stimulus from the outside, but at the same time working on the inner world.

Gerd Stein: We were, it was our intention and it followed certain people and their ideas. Such as Meher Baba, such as Marshall McLuhan, who became a friend. From a Jewish point of view, it all came together and it was, like I said, a mix and at the beginning got a little carried away by overload. That's what it is. The man who invented the strobe, Harold Edgerton, came to a big performance of ours at MIT at Kresge Auditorium and called us the next day and said you probably don't know who I am but I saw that puny strobe that you were using. I'd like to show you what a real strobe looks like. Come to me at my office and laboratory at MIT. Well, we were in Cambridge anyway. Well, we met him and we knew him for the rest of his life and he gave us actual strobe bulbs from the company which he was part of Germeshausen and Grier. It no longer exists, but he showed us his big strobes on the Prudential Tower in Boston and we adapted his circuitry, and we used it, and we did big strobe environments, which were four strobe heads, on a gazebo which held maybe fifteen or twenty people on plastic walls, on the floor with subway gratings and fans underneath it, and balloons floating around, and we did it not only in the US, but also in Europe. And actually, one of our strobe rooms, was acquired by a museum in Seville in Spain and they still have it. And so on and so forth.

It was a fascinating time and occupation for us. We were recognized, which still seems to be because people ask us and we keep doing exhibitions and multimedia performances here and there.

Charlie Morrow: Well, thank you.

Gerd Stein: Well, we performed as USCO. USCO was never a real entity. As of the early 1960s, we had incorporated a 501c3 called Intermediate Foundation, which still exists, which owns our artwork and actually our church headquarters in Garnerville, New York. And we're dealing with that very effectively through Stanford University, which some years ago purchased over 400 boxes of papers slides film 1500 audiotapes as our archive which exists at

Stanford and much of which has been digitized and there are four faculty members who are involved with that archive.

I believe Frederick Turner wrote two books with chapters about us. One called *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, and the other one, *The Democratic Surround*, both of them, University of Chicago Press. And Henry Lowood, who is the acquisitions librarian and Franz Kunst, who is an archivist Gabriella who is the development person and they're still working with us trying to achieve more ownership of our work and our church building because they feel that we were the beginnings of multimedia and they would like to preserve that history.

Charlie Morrow: That's marvelous. Thank you for talking with me today. And we'll talk again soon. I much appreciated seeing you last night, and I'm very happy that we got an interview today.

Gerd Stein: Wonderful and I love the word "immersive." It certainly covers a lot of our intention and motivation. And what I think, and as part of my Jewish heritage is that intention and motivation are what consciousness is all about. And that's what we were trying to achieve. Thank you.

Charlie Morrow: I wish you a good day and send you lots of love and talk to you very soon.