

## PROFILE: rod summers. sound artist in Holland

*Editor's Note: This interview was held last summer with Rod Summers in his home in Maastricht, in the south of Holland. Summers has been known throughout the world as an audio artist, but this interview reveals more about the diverse interests of Rod Summers of V.E.C.*

Since you've been in Holland, have you asked the government for any grants? Have you joined the Artists' Union? Yes, I joined the artists' union in 1974. I came here in 1973, and I joined in 1974-75. I have asked money from the government mainly to support one journey, outside of the normal range, Germany, France, this one to Poland, Rejkavik. If the trip is that far out, I cannot afford the fare myself, so therefore I ask the government for assistance. And usually they say yes. They give me money when I get and provide documentation. So it really doesn't help.

But as an artist, I can go to the bank and get credit, and they say they will give me up to \$300 if I provide them with proper documentation when I return to show I've been away. Apart from that, I have had money to help go to Israel. Otherwise, I have had no subsidies.

**Is this unusual in Maastricht?**

I think so. But it's really not necessary for me to apply for extra money. The costs to run V.E.C. is about \$2000 a year and most of my own activities, most of my own media, material—well, the most expensive is tape and photographic material—so I can earn that money here. I don't really need more than that—things that I sell, occasionally teaching. Living with the possibilities here should give you enough strength in itself.

**Then why are all these artists applying for housing, for studios, for materials, for an exhibition, for eventual purchase, and still finding themselves frustrated at not having the potential situation?**

Because I think the system teaches them to be like that. I came out of a different background, independent, but completely dependent upon government backing. Now I'm totally independent, but dependent upon my wife to pay the rent. If not, we would get social security which would pay the rent. V.E.C. would just have to pull back a little bit, but it would come back. Even if there were no money, the activity will carry on, because the activity is my activity, and the mailing is part of it.

**How did you get into this Sound Art?**

I bought a tape recorder in 1961 in the town of Hereford. There's a military base there to train young boys to become soldiers. I did about 3-4 months there and found out I have been in entirely the wrong trade. I went there as a storeman. I decided I didn't want to do that, and I decided to muster and become a medic. And there were no courses for a medic there at that time, so I had to go to courses in another town in the north, and I bought a tape recorder on the way. I had a lot of fun with it until I eventually sold it in Ireland.

I did play my first sound piece in 1972 with Raoul Marroquin, Ward and two other artists. I had already been making pieces by that time. I had built my own tone generator while I had managed to short circuit the transistor to make it. I still have tapes from it. I was recording from two tape recor-

ders and a mixer. I had made this piece, the sound work which represented two very close friends climbing a mountain, getting to the top, and what they see, and on the way back down again, one slips and falls and then the major part of the piece is the sensations and feelings of the other person as he has to climb down, he tells the people at the bottom of the hill what happened to his friend. Raoul heard this piece the basic tape, and he said, "well, bring it along and we'll play it at the same time we've having the exhibition." Why not? And so I brought in a tape recorder, without any permission, and we played it, and a couple of people came up and one person in particular, and said that he thought it was very strange thing to be having this noise in the museum, and said why don't you have a symphony orchestra in here, instead. And then I said, if we had a symphony orchestra in here, we wouldn't be able to listen to ourselves talking. He was very upset. And that was the first piece that I had made, which I had already been making before 1973.

**Before that, what kind of artist were you?**

I was a poet. I had been writing forever. I won my first National Poetry Prize when I was 6 years old from the World Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals—a poem and an essay about bird protection in the winter, and my guardian probably had more control over that piece than I did, because she was a very strong influence when I was very small. She used to read me *Hiawatha*, and her husband used to play Bach music on the piano, and these were the two things that kept me quiet when I was a baby. And I have a terrible passion for Bach music. I can tell you that. And I am very much in love with traditional linear types of poetry, especially that of Dylan Thomas.

I wrote, but nobody is a poet. It's not a profession or a trade, especially if you come from a farming community and I really wrote continuously until I went to India. That's when I started to write much more seriously because there was a great deal more to talk about which naturally came out in the form of poetry—not necessarily in rhyme, but trying hard. I started taking photographs to try to see and visualize the poetry. Then I met Raoul (Marroquin) who is an artist, and Raoul was doing things which showed me a whole new way of doing things and then I was introduced, I think, by Michael Gibbs to V.E.C. poetry (Visual and experimental concrete poetry (that's what V.E.C. stands for), and I thought there's where the poet's foundation is, and then you could go from poetry straight through to art, and then I became a poet almost without knowing it. I hope tomorrow to become an artist. I moved from soldier, to poet, to photographer, and then an audio artist—and yet the audio art is really poetry. V.E.C. is non-linear forms of poetry, and 70% of the audio I make is sound poetry. It has very little to do with music; the other 30% is probably music concrete.

**You've been recognized through various networks (both mail and personal visits by artists from all over the world, some of whom have never met you except via the international postal system) so in a strange way your network is a sound network that uses an established distribution system. What happens when the international postal system goes electronic? Vittore (Baroni) and I are in conversation via letter about this issue. "It looks like the only way to go is via the compu-**

ter"—that's one of his statements in his last letter. I don't really know about that. It would mean an end to this. It means another way, and I don't know how to transmit the information. I will wait until the new system becomes more readily acceptable, and then I'm going to try to see how to translate poetry into this, that's all.



Left, ROD SUMMERS; Right, HENRYK GAJEWSKI

What I mean is something more traumatic. Now that your recognition has been made wider by friends, word of mouth, the network, and those who recognize quality in a small community, even though it is international. Now that everyone is wired for sound, thanks to the new transistorized systems, do you feel some way a pioneer, a catalyst, or just a medium through which artists divulge some of their talents?

In 1978, I went to make a project. I was working with sound a lot, making a lot of recordings, and then sound became a very important part of my art, while I was exhibiting the photographs, slides, installations, and sound was very important too. Then I was invited to Poland, and Poland was my first public performance using sound in the Remont Gallery, and I was totally flabbergasted at how people reacted. Everyone really went wild, they thought it was cheese and bread. It was totally unexpected. I came back and had 6 or 7 tapes from my mail art friends. John Bennett, Leonhard Duch, and I had some pieces which I had made with Anna Banana and Bill Gaglione when they came to visit, and had these pieces which I had made for the Polish performance, called Polish Environmental Reaction, and some I had made

with the audience which was there, so this was a fair amount of material. I was then interested in finding out what other people were doing, so I made this postcard, and mailed it out, and very very fast I got a lot of cassettes back—15 to be exact—so I made a program to listen from these tapes. It wasn't supposed to go on, but it just grew and grew, until now I could make a program every month, but there are no possibilities because of the cost. And I just don't have that sort of time. But it really is creeping into all of my time. Out of an edition of 150, I offer 25 for sale, which barely covers the cost of the edition. With 25 for sale, it's going to be very difficult for distribution, and I can't afford to have five or six sitting around because I can only keep it down to that 25. I cannot afford to pay that 33 1/3 per cent commission, which is expected. I only made that 25 available for those who didn't want to participate but really wanted the information. So there are 125, which are made one at a time, and with the speed those cassettes come in, I can usually barely afford to buy these tapes, copy the cassettes, and send them out. It just keeps going over at the same rate. They are starting to sell a bit. Radio Sweden just bought a complete set, and somebody here in Holland bought a set. And somebody in Germany, and people are actually writing theses and papers about sound poetry and sound art. It's wonderful for them, because they get immediate coverage of the last three years of one group of artists.

Distribution has always been a problem. I then decided, after I had begun, that it would be a bit more costly than I expected to generate more money, so I made a decision to do editions. 12 audio exchange programs and 10 audio editions, and these editions are usually one artist on a cassette. One hour of John Bennett reading his poems, there's one of me reading short stories, there's a Polish Futurist cassette one side done by Piotr Ripson who came here especially to record (some poems never before published) and on the other side, Italian Futurist poetry that's never been published before. There's an audio biography, and a couple of pieces I've created myself. The idea about doing this is that I would sell these, I would make it for the artist, he or she would have 5 copies for free, and then the edition would be 125, and then I would sell them. But I've never had the time or the inclination to advertise. That's been the problem. There's never been any advertising for them; if someone could handle that side of things, and let me do this side, but it's very hard to find somebody.

I have this concept of art as a cosmological stream, constantly over the whole of the universe, and we take from the stream. We don't take from the water of the stream or the substance of the stream, but we take from the substance of what floats in the stream, the flotsam and the jetsam, and we take it and leave it to dry. And if it dries, and it holds, it's still there in 200 years. If it doesn't hold, it's of no substance, then it dissolves. So we need someone to help pick up this material and distribute it. There just isn't enough time to do all of it.

This all runs on a shoestring, stumbling from one month to the next.

**What do you see in the future for yourself?**

I also see recognition through audio exchange; people have begun to notice my own audio work, and I'm starting to get invitations, where Rod Summers will eventually be able to

achieve his aim, to make enough money from his own work to allow V.E.C. to continue exactly as it is. Advertising a bit more, the exchange of this material.

**It looks like you enjoy the anonymity behind V.E.C. "Anonymity".** No, because it creates a lot of problems. Especially letters from Americans that worry about this "faceless" organization. I don't answer things that seem to come from nameless companies. I'm very worried when I get things from just "Art Foot" because I don't know what that is. I'd like to know that there is a person behind that name. V.E.C. would sound terrible as Rod Summers Organization.

**No, but you could put your name in the second line, so that there is a connection.**

I don't necessarily appear on all programs. There are cassettes where I don't have anything on it. I find it charming that V.E.C. doesn't communicate "Rod Summers". I don't blame people who write and say, "Who's this?" and then they get an answer saying "it's me."

**As far as equipment in Europe, have you found all the equipment you need, within the price range?**  
In a performance situation, you take what you find, because you never find the equipment you need. The tapes are copied one-to-one, so I have a tape recorder (we have two) and one cassette copier. The equipment that I need is all here. The problem is finding the money to pay for it. Now having a new second cassette recorder, whereas the old one was on its last legs, V.E.C. Audio Exchange technically can continue for a while. Although at the moment, I am using four-track to play the master tapes because the half-track is running slow and has to be replaced, worn out after hundreds of copies, and I'm wearing out my composition machine which should not be used for playing back master tapes. It is a machine which should be used for composing Rod Summers' audio works, and needs new heads and that costs about \$500. But we can't worry about it, we just press on.

**Are you going to be doing a performance installation in Iceland?**

It's called Iceland Environmental Reaction, the piece that I have so far is the bottom line. I'm going for the first four days camping on a glacier, and then I'm going to photograph a cliff face which is filled with puffins, and I'm going to photograph it with normal lenses, just to get the movements of black and white puffins against the rock face, and I'm also going to record puffin sounds—stereo recordings of the puffins, very close up and using a parabolic reflector. I really want to get their conversations with each other, because they speak like people do with sounds. Then I'm going to record the wind through the glacier, and I hope the weather holds. I'm also going to record the sound of the sea, just directly, the sound of the wind on one track, and then the sound of the sea on the other, left and right monitors, and then the birds' songs will be on stereo. These two tapes will last a half-hour each. In the installation, the background of the hall is made of wood, very high, and the floor is made of concrete, typical Icelandic construction, and at the back of the space, two tape recorders will be placed, one will be playing the bird song, and in front of it will be made a sand representation of the burrow of the puffin and one puffin egg inside. On the other side will be the sound of the sea and the sound of the wind.

For the performance, I start the tapes simultaneously, and then I'm going to tape two boards and am going to push the pebbles along the parallel lines so that they don't fall out of the parallel lines so that they don't fall out of the lines, into as high piles as I can, which will probably be the size of the space. I will end up with four piles of stones with spaces in-between and then in these spaces in-between, I'm going to do a polyp on the floor with the colors of paint birds make—seagulls on Iceland, because they nest so close together when their egg is laid, it has red and red-brown pigments in it, which are still soft after the egg is laid, and then the mother bird makes a mark with this pigment, and every bird recognizes his own egg. I've been studying these egg designs. And in between these piles of stones, I'm going to put a teaspoon of polyp-size designs. And the installation will be this pile of paintings, etc.

**Birds are very important to you, aren't they?**

Yes, I find birds are very fascinating creatures, the construction of the birds, their wings, all very marvelous.

**Do you know Joyce Cutler Shaw?**

Yes, I have one of her pieces on one of the audio exchanges. She's very into the artist as messenger, and the bird as messenger. In our bedroom, we have two of her pieces hanging together. Her work is very beautiful. Her work arrived at a very rare time, and now mail art has changed. And now what's left over from mail art has become very crisp art—much too valuable to put postage stamps on it. I think it's filtered itself out this way. I've sent marijuana leaves to mail art shows in California, and the American postal system obviously allows it to go through.

My first performance was in the museum here. There was no name on the museum here in Maastricht when it first opened, so in my performance, I thought I'd put a name above the door, just saying "Museum". I then went to the Museum and photographed the oldest dictionary in the museum, and on the page where it says, museum, I made six prints and cut them out in the shape of Latin letter forms, and put them on a board, and did the performance. Stayed up about 6 weeks, meaning the sign outside. It was done during my student days.

**Do you teach at the Academy here?**

You have to be very careful about teaching here. Twice a year I get invited to the Jan van Eyck Academy, where I talk about audio art. In fact, where there is a group of students who want me to talk. Now I think that audio is very difficult to teach. I don't know where you start teaching audio art, because when you start, you can begin with the philosophy of creation, or exercise for endless hours the people's ability to hear. So when I go there I talk about recording techniques, what cassettes to use, how to demagnetize, how to keep your recorders clean, what tapes to use, examples of what other people do, and make loops, and things like that. And it works very well. I make it a three-day gig.

*Rod Summers has published many books of poetry, short stories, mail art projects and of course, the V.E.C. Audio Exchange Programmes. If you wish to learn more about V.E.C. and participate in it, write to Rod Summers, VEC Audio, Postbox 1051, 6201 BB Maastricht, The Netherlands. (043)34939 if you are in the vicinity.*