

Who Will Give Answer to the Call of My Voice? Sound in the Work of Tony Oursler

By Tony Conrad

Published in Ediciones Poligrafa

Aug. 1, 2001

I am not a talking head.

(Tony Oursler's image as devil, projected on a horned-head maquette; Machine, 2000)

Pictures are more civil than noise. Only exceptionally is the clangor of clashing audio tracks less than hellish in museum efforts to exhibit multiple works with sound. Whether the pieces are films, recorded performances, sound works, or video installations, their simultaneous audio emanations compete and quarrel among one another in the resonant "white cube" in ways that pictures never would. The smooth clear rectilinear walls and hardwood floors of the modern museum gallery are the antithesis of a recording studio, with its soundproofing and wall-to-wall carpeting.

When you step into a Tony Oursler show, though, the overlapping sound tracks somehow garble together, cohering as they weave an infernal sonic tapestry.

Here sighs and cries and wails coiled and recoiled
on the starless air, spilling my soul to tears.
A confusion of tongues and monstrous accents toiled
in pain and anger. Voices hoarse and shrill
and sounds of blows, all intermingled, raised
tumult and pandemonium that still
whirls on the air forever dirty with it as if a whirlwind sucked at sand.
Dante, Inferno, III:22-29

Almost any of Tony Oursler's shows has confronted the visitor with a cacophony of voice tracks, mingling among a melange of projected images, each voicing its own complaints, introspective remarks, or censorious social commentary. These are not unified individual works in the modernist sense; each is an art piece that has made a break for it, has escaped

the Frame, but then-- hobbled by the tether of video (its cables the implied-- even if not visible-- framing edges of the video image)-- it fails, importantly, to stand free, and instead is pinned in place, projected flat, a crushed soul, skewered in the din. This is hellavision; it is the Nietzschean sentence of eternal return visited upon sculptural form. Each of Oursler's surrogate portraits (their existential horror would not permit them to be subsumed to actual portraiture although his video has become 90 percent "talking heads" an iconic bust format they share with both classic portraiture and television news) is captured, transfixed in the headlights of time, given a speech and a face, and doomed to endlessly recycle their recorded interval of a few seconds or minutes. "Fixed in slime they speak their piece, end it, and start again" (Dante, *Inferno*, VII:119-120).

Even Oursler's early single-channel video works tended toward this chthonic acoustic miasma. "I used three or four cheap cassette players playing back at the same time to multi-track," he explains. The frequent appearance of an organ in these soundtracks tugs at other hellish associations with vampire films, the mass, the camp orientalism of Korla Pandit, and, as Oursler himself says, "the creepy tradition of soap opera music." 2

Frankie Teardrop (Alan Suicide and Mike Robinson, 1979), an electrifying super-8 "punk" film, stuns the eye with a churning super-8 montage, while the film's tremulous energy is transfused through a breathlessly histrionic vocal by Alan Vega. Oursler was inspired by Alan Vega, whose music with Martin Rev in Suicide freed me to do a lot of my soundtrack work. I loved making the music. . . . I fell in love with the organ. It's so basic, all you can do is go up or down on the emotional scale -- Suicide was essentially organ and voice. I had seen them live in NYC and it had great impact-- they were amazing. 3 For Oursler, music, then as in his most recent work, has served largely to condition the viewer's emotional ambiance toward a receptivity to the messages of his voices, once the viewer's eye is bedazzled by his images.

Oursler's embranglement with music may also be traced through a succession of collaborations with performers and composers with Sonic Youth, Arto Lindsay, Glenn Branca, and Tony Conrad. 4 There is Oursler's own music too. In 1997 he and Mike Kelley collaborated on the remixing, rerecording, and reissuing of songs recorded by their band, The Poetics, two decades earlier. And *Fantastic Prayers*, his most recent "single channel" work (a

CD-ROM, not a videotape), is a cooperative product of Oursler's longtime collaboration with author/performance artist Constance DeJong and musician Steven Vitiello.

It would be futile to attempt a full inventory of *Fantastic Prayers* here; it is one of the richest and most variegated artist productions ever realized on CD-ROM. In *Fantastic Prayers* the deliciously inventive transitions between images and scenes (and inspired transitions are the kernel of CD-ROM quality) traverse a denser-than-expected skein of virtual sites, sustaining an almost novelistic interest. In fact, *Fantastic Prayers* even incorporates a complete DeJong text, aside from her vocal and image contributions. DeJong is also primarily responsible for an astonishing phoneme-organ that is perhaps the crowning sonic jewel in the *Fantastic Prayers* audio cache.

With *Fantastic Prayers* Oursler has returned to a more coloristic use of sound, adding animal sounds and musical elements, as in the graveyard subsequences. These midcareer sonic brushstrokes are far more controlled than the impetuous and abandoned playing of *The Poetics* the art school band he founded with Kelley, John Miller, and others in the 1970s and far more precise than the emotional musical gestures of his single-channel video work.

Then Saul said to his servants, "Find a woman who is a necromancer for me to go and consult her." His servants replied, "There is a necromancer at Endor."

And so Saul, disguising himself and changing his clothes, set out accompanied by two men; their visit to the woman took place at night. "Disclose the future to me," he said, "by means of a ghost. . . ." The woman answered, "Look, you know what Saul has done, how he has swept the necromancers and wizards out of the country; why are you setting a trap for my life, then, to have me killed?"

The king said, "Do not be afraid! What do you see?" The woman answered Saul, "I see a ghost rising up from the earth."

I Samuel 28:7-9, 13 (The Jerusalem Bible)

In this manner King Saul was given foreknowledge of his and his sons' deaths on the following day at the hands of the Philistine army. Saul's death is reported in two versions. In

one, wounded, he falls upon his own sword (I Samuel31:4); in another he is hard pressed in battle and asks a nearby soldier to dispatch him (II Samuel1:6, 9-10). The story thus invites further interrogation but of whom Who tells the first version we do not know. Why the teller of the second version (the nearby soldier) should have expected any advantage from speaking out at all is unclear because in the next moment after he relates his version to David, David has him slain. Infected by this preliminary inquiry, we might wonder further who tells the story of the witch of Endor? The account carefully wraps the whole episode in layered invisibilities: Saul is disguised, is accompanied by only two men, and goes under cover of darkness. The "ghost," which speaks with the voice of Samuel, is never seen, except through the woman's vision.

Saul's tale is, of course, told by the winners after his death; that is, it is viewed from the perspective of David, who was Saul's deadly adversary and whose confederacy with the Philistines is camouflaged by his reported absence from the battle. Perhaps the story of the visit to the necromancer is intended to show that Saul's death was preordained. As a secular figure, the witch removes Yahweh from the potentially impolitic position of having foreseen or even perhaps implemented the king's undoing by the Philistines. The soldier's execution displays David's concern to cast Saul's death as evil.

The curious undercurrent running through this story is the strong sympathy for the necromancer. Outlawed by the bad King Saul, she is nevertheless "good"; she offers him help and hospitality. Moreover, the storyteller is surprisingly complacent in evoking this plainly unorthodox image: a ghost, or a ghostly voice, emanates from the earth at the soothsayer's feet-- a ghost who engages Saul in conversation. We can conclude only that this was a familiar and recognizable scene for the story's audience; it must have had enough credibility and sympathy that it would arouse no antipathy toward the teller among Yahweh's believers. Certainly, Saul had "swept the necromancers and wizards out of the country," but the subtext here is that this banishment was not popular. A consultation such as Saul's was a commonplace among the ancient Hebrews.

Valentine Vox describes how, in contacting the dead, the necromancer, or "Baalat-Obh" in Hebrew, "would stoop down and feign a hollow voice that seemed to come from the lower joints or the ground." 5 The ancient ventriloquists sometimes used a resonant cavity in the

ground, or a vapor vent, to misdirect attention and confuse the location of the voice. There was never a "dummy," or ventriloquist's puppet. Most often, bent over and speaking in a muffled tone, the ventriloquist would easily convince the listener that a voice was coming from a "spirit" trapped in the ventriloquist's belly. 6 This early form of ventriloquism, in which a muted voice seemed to emanate from a spirit in the ground or the belly, continued to be associated with supernatural divination until the Enlightenment. 'Ventriloquism', in fact, means "belly-speaking."

During the Enlightenment, extraordinary experience-- which had always been received as divine or magical-- was subjected to a cataclysmic transformation, becoming either "natural," in the case of scientific surprises, or simply impossible. The Impossible, of course, could only be received as entertainment, no matter how convincing and paradoxical it might be. The amusement value of a magic show, for example, was exactly as great as the impossibility of its acts. Suddenly ventriloquism became a mere entertainment. The "marriage between puppetry and ventriloquism" took place in 1750, when the Austrian Baron von Mengen began to perform accompanied by a small puppet with a moving mouth. 7 Before long ventriloquism was only one more tactic in the magician's bag of tricks. Erik Barnouw has described how the cinema, too, as it first emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, was often simply a magician's accessory. In the end it turned out, to the distress of magicians, that the cinema was, of course, stronger than magic.

The magician found he had been helping to destroy his own profession. Many magicians survived as magicians, in some cases by stressing the ancient skills of prestidigitation, rather than equipment trickery. Others merged into the world of film and took part in a new evolution of the extraordinary. 8

The epistemological wonder of the Impossible lingered on during the early-twentieth century but unhurriedly expired as new technologies of illusion irrevocably domesticated the imagery of the Impossible, first using stop action and double exposures, then optical effects and models, and finally by using computer animation and morphing. Today any child in front of a TV is completely jaded; in the twenty-first century there is no "impossible." Not only can inanimate objects speak, but any genera of "magical" phenomena may occur normally, inside the television frame. The loss of wonder that accompanies this jadedness certainly does not

serve the interests of the entertainment industry. Instead, movies and TV try in vain to blur the epistemological boundary between the imaginary and the Impossible by maintaining some (even paradoxical) semblance of the "real" inside the moving-image frame.

"Reality" on television has always been problematic, not least because television both uses long uninterrupted "takes" (which mimic the durability of the world around us) and habitually chops up the scene into close-ups (which do not).⁹ But if a region can be found and set carefully apart within the cinema and television for "realities" such as news, sports, and documentaries, then the "magic" of fictional effects could be preserved to some degree. Should the boundary of the "real" within the frame collapse, the wonder of the illusionary impossible becomes lost. This is why twentieth-century television ventriloquists like Edgar Bergen (and his puppet, Charlie McCarthy) were able to achieve a remarkable early popularity, but one that lasted only until viewers realized that television technology encompasses techniques of illusion that utterly overwhelm the parlor tricks of a ventriloquist or stage magician.

It is true that impossible spectacles are still constructed for us outside of the moving- image frame (e.g., Disney World, the circus, communion). But as the induced epistemology of the television experience increasingly saturates us, Impossibility itself seems less and less paradoxical; at the same time, the unremitting spectacle of scientific technological display has jaded us in our relation to impossibilities within the "real." Tony Oursler's technology is neither mysteriously "scientific" nor hidden. He makes the devices of his illusion visible, and uses a technology that is immediately graspable. But by moving the boundary of illusion beyond the frame, he has constructed a twenty-first- century epistemological paradox. Within this paradox there are separate rules governing the throwing of the voice and the throwing of the image, deriving in part from the sense in which the image is always virtually (even if not actually) framed, while the voice is not.

As the early Greeks recognized, the eye somehow reaches out to an image; the voice, on the other hand, though it "goes with" the image, in effect fills and reverberates the surrounding space, penetrating and occupying every air molecule. The visual image appears to "keep its distance" from us, while its voice sneaks right inside our ears. If this were not so, at least in some measure, how could voices issuing from visually separate images overlap and merge

into babble? And why should a voice coming from a loudspeaker appear to be spoken by a face that mouths the words, though the image be some distance from the speaker?

The telephone, radio, and phonograph, taken together, configure a modern "ghost" space in which the disembodied voice has been psychologically "re-embodied," in which the discrepancy between the location of a voice and the location of its speaker has somehow been canceled. From where did this ability to uncouple sight from sound come? Hearing and vision are both used by all primate species as orientation systems, but the two sensoria evolved at different times and in different circumstances. Environmental mapping by sound came first; it let mammals function in the dark, something reptiles could not do. Binocular space perception evolved much later, when primates reclaimed the daylight by taking to the trees, using binocular depth perception. So it is not surprising that these two maps can work somewhat independently.

More needs to be said about the powerful role accorded the voice in Oursler's work, in large part because the assignment of voices to ghosts has, as we have seen, been a mark of Western cultural practices since antiquity. Voicecasting throwing the voice, like a net, over and around an image? is a trademark device of the "puppetry" that has pervaded Oursler's career. Oursler's "puppets" are so visually diverse, often even screwy, insubstantial, or unexpectedly synecdochic, that they draw us into an unexpected dramatic register, one in which the voice itself is the dominant figure. Oursler's voices don't arise from his effigies' mouths; sometimes they are barely even close by. Occasionally we might find a tiny voice rewarding us when we inspect a small recess (in one case it is the inside of an atomic nucleus in the molecular model for heroin), inhabited by a little monitor/identity. But more often Oursler throws the voice at his mannequins.

I regard truth as a divine ventriloquist: I care not from whose mouth the sounds are supposed to proceed, if only the words are audible and intelligible.

Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ix.

Even though ventriloquism is called "throwing the voice," it is hard to imagine how, absent the use of acoustical lenses, it would "really" be possible to "throw" the voice in the same sense that one "projects" (literally, "throws forward") an image. When a (so-called "real")

image is focused on a screen or other object, it and its component shapes and colors are sited, fixed, nailed down, to a degree and in a way that is very different from the way the spatial elements of an acoustic "image" are localized. Oursler's voices are "thrown" upon their associated images; yet by remaining separately and differently localized from the image, each voice, paradoxically, "frames" its images, in the sense that by paying attention to the separation of the voice we, in effect, demarcate a certain boundary of the image's "reality." That is, the physical system of video projection, while releasing the image from its frame on the TV screen into space, simultaneously demands a new suspension of disbelief on the part of the viewer. Yet in the perceived absence of a video frame, the viewer's sense of the Impossible is resurrected, allegorically recovered: the frame is a life boundary. Outside the frame is reality; inside is hell. Isn't the frame the grave of portraiture (engraving), the place where the likeness is frozen as dead yet endures in its semblance of life?

Oursler commonly makes the situation of his figures distressed, painful to witness. Our knee-jerk psychological and epistemological investment in the character then flows freely into the stream of paradoxes in which the figure is immersed as a projection. The diegetic crises of the figures, which are both psychic and physical, awaken our narrative reflexes and draw us into the circle of the Impossible, which admits us only when we break the frame of illusion and sustain the "real" -ism that we concede to the image of the Impossible. 10

Leslie Fiedler has provided a name for this conformation of impossibility and truth. "Only the true Freak," he writes, "challenges the conventional boundaries between male and female, sexed and sexless, animal and human, large and small, between self and other, and consequently between reality and illusion, experience and fantasy, fact and myth." 11 As Oursler's "talking head" videos are projected onto bent or articulated surfaces, his subjects melt into caricatures, freaks. They become pinheads; their eyes swell to Keene-like proportions (Sixties kitsch artist Walter Keene "had a special place for me and all Americans" 12). As though to mock their sterile blindness, some puppets have become only gargantuan eyeballs, silently challenging: "Look! Don't you believe Eye can see you too?"

Tony Oursler's mouths without faces, like his heads without bodies, do have voices; they speak grotesquely from the surfaces of disembodied hearts (in *Fantastic Prayers*) or mannequin torsos, or wherever they are projected. These dismemberments are sometimes

paralleled by a fragmentation of the spoken message or even a breakdown of phonemic structures. Oursler's term for this loss of consciousness, this ecstatic sexual surrender to the larger constitutive forces of the creator (himself), is "orgasmic babble." In its interest he deploys the core artistic devices of the formalist toolkit-- fragmentation, repetition, and reframing-- as mechanisms for sexual inundation and subjugation. Any viewer whose trapped and broken spirit echoes the wails in these works is a sexual victim, too, a soul whose lost unity-of-being betokens the release within of an unmanageable sexuality that will ooze up between every shard of the shattered self.

And hell, the burbling conflux of voices, is a system of "orgasmic babble." Oursler subjects himself to this multiplication and division of spirit and image, notably in Untitled MPD (1998), an almost Paik-like grid/wall of heads with simultaneous projected images of the artist, all speaking at once; an extreme icon of identity fragmentation. The monumental woman's head of Digital Blue (1997) (performed by Constance DeJong) is projected on a raster of Plexiglas bricks that must be more than five cubits tall. DeJong's voice has been manipulated, distorted; she also reads a cut-up script. The fractured voice, which occupies both tonal (illocutionary) and semantic registers, is fragmented alternately by the atomization of the text and by a distortion of the acoustic flow; the interplay of these two registers as they come apart internally and interactively also plays against the fracturing of the image as it falls across the tiers of bricks. "I am, I am not," DeJong repeats over and over, a litany ambiguously expressing either her epistemological distance from the viewer or a soulless jouissance.

There is an up-front and persistent dualism behind much of the sound-flow in Oursler's work, which is in its foundations more Cartesian than Freudian. Ghosts, skulls, fetuses: images of death in life, life in death. "Stay out of my mind!" his figure adjures. And not only does Oursler conjure up (but, ultimately, only to problematize) the Cartesian dualism of mind (voice) versus body (image) by using ventriloquism; he goes further, beyond the ontological dualism of normalcy, to Possession (1998). The voice of possession is an inverted ventriloquism; its messages are received or channeled, not thrown. Oursler segregates possession from ventriloquism by marking Possession with glossolalia, the speaking of the other through one's own body, in unknown and mixed tongues, and by a more extreme form which is not even word salad but a caponata of disjunctive phonemes, as if the received

"message" were extracted and scrambled from unknown languages.

Though Oursler's pieces are rife with the iconography of death--skulls, drugs, and devils-- these are almost always mere set dressing for his avatars, the speaking figures, whose voices animate the geometry of their damnation. While both the reflected light from the projected images and the sounds of the voices beam out into the space around, his sculptural figures remain confined, crushed, bound, drowned, entrapped, imprisoned, paralyzed, inert. Sometimes the figure is being crushed under a piece of furniture, or it is hanged on the wall; it may be sealed in a tank or box or locked into a suffocating tableau. Sometimes tiny images are frozen in place, or they wander impotently across a screen surface that is more junk pile than intaglio-- the whitewashed labyrinth no longer visually a screen but more of a small stage set, a planet, a trap. And always the projected image itself ensnares the figure in a recording. The figural overdetermination of capture and restraint is incessant.

Always, in art, the processes of the work are reflected in those of the viewer. And so the trap that appears to have captured Oursler's figure is set to spring on the viewer. A voice with a mask (this is the etymology of person) becomes a powerful and even irresistible attractor to the narrative investment of the viewer. The voice doesn't even need to come from the image; it merely needs to be associated with it.

Voices and images signal impotently for help, for resistance, for submission, or for reflection. In the Infernovisages visually melt and merge? "two heads had already blurred and blended; now two new semblances appeared and faded, one face where neither face began nor ended" (XXV: 67-69)-- but here it is only the sound, in its cumulativity, overlapping and merging, becoming a sonic blur, and dismantling its own signifying capacity, which finally captures our desire for clarity and twists the viewer into position. Come closer, the babble compels, to hear and understand what each of us is saying, to segregate the single voice amid the crowd, to drink more deeply of the visible plight before you.

Shade, shadow: these terms -- each calling up the dark side of an object (but then, add also materialization, the object itself)-- each of these is a synonym for ghost. Even image itself, almost a stand-in for art work, was in archaic usage a phantasm. Early in his career, when his images sparkled on the surface of a vacuum tube sprayed internally with electrons, Oursler

was preoccupied with the fetus as an image. His procession to the opposite pole of life follows the ejaculation of his images into the body of our surrounding world, the "little death" of video projection.

Voices have accompanied irruptions of magic throughout history, taking the form of speaking statues, oracles, speaking stones, voices from the earth, and so on. But just before the modern period the Western churches closed ranks in opposing ventriloquism and necromancy, acting in ways that we now understand in terms of politics and sexuality. Then the Enlightenment so rebuked the Impossible that it could only appear, before a nervous but ever fascinated populace, as "entertainment," safely ensconced within the magic circle of the theatrical proscenium. Finally, in the twentieth century, ventriloquism succumbed to imprisonment on the screen. Now decades have passed; and animation has become so ubiquitous and sophisticated that it is hard even to imagine that a ventriloquist could attract a TV rating. Although puppets with voices still captivate children on TV every Saturday morning, adults are inured to this spectacle.

But now, at the point when historically we might be led to expect the death of the Impossible and the final extirpation of an outmoded magic from our surroundings, Tony Oursler announces magic's repenetration, by television, into the phenomenal world. As magic, Oursler's figures do not simply perform technological services for reanimating the world, as do talking elevators or greeting cards, but instead they reoccupy the sites of personal and spiritual authority that magical forces seemed to have abandoned. Outfitted with the pseudopod of video projection, Tony Oursler's television has pushed outside the confines of the tube to reclaim and reanimate a place for wonder within the real.

Notes

1. As, for instance, in the MOCA-based exhibition, *Hall of Mirrors: Art and Film since 1945* (1996).
2. Mike Kelley. "An Endless Script: A Conversation with Tony Oursler," in Deborah Rothschild, *Tony Oursler Introjection: Mid-career Survey 1976-1999*, Williams College Museum of Art (1999), 43.

3. Kelley, "An Endless Script," 43.
4. Sonic Youth contributed to *Sessesion*(1995); Arto Lindsay produced a guitar solo for the installation *Why I Love Guitar, Why I Love Drums*(1997); Glenn Branca collaborated on the audio installation and CD *Empty Blue*, which was presented at Expo 2000 in Hannover as an aspect of *In Between*; and Tony Conrad produced a soundtrack and CD for *The Influence Machine*, an outdoor public installation shown in New York and London (2000).
5. Valentine Vox, *I Can See Your Lips Moving: The History and Art of Ventriloquism* (Tadworth, Surrey : Kaye & Ward, Ltd., 1981), 14.
6. Or perhaps the belly of the ventriloquist's client; scholars disagree in interpreting the ambiguous ancient Greek texts. See Plato, *Sophist* 252c; Plutarch, *Moralia* 414e; and Aristophanes, *Wasps* 1017-1020, esp. MacDowell's commentary on 1019 (Aristophanes, *Wasps*, ed. Douglas M. MacDowell. Oxford : Clarendon Press 1971).
7. Vox, 49.
8. Erik Barnouw, *The Magician and the Cinema*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 9.
9. In both respects Tony Oursler's installation video is a return to "traditional" television while everything else in his deployment of these tools is endlessly novel.
10. Similar epistemological crisscrossings are endemic to all pictures and to the "pictural text," as Derrida calls it: "Every relation to a pictural text implies this double movement doubly interlaced to itself. It is a kind of fort/da Heidegger's whole discourse [here and elsewhere] is supported by [s' entretient du; also, "chats about"] the fort/da , and here of a picture which marks or sets marching [fait marcher, takes for a ride] the fort/da in painting . . . the whole path of thought, for Heidegger, leads back, by a dis tancing, to a Da [thus the Da of Sein] which is not merely close, but whose proximity lets the distance of the fort play within it." Jacques Derrida, "Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing [pointure]," in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago and London : University of Chicago Press, (1987), 357. Emphasis in original.
11. Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*. New York : Simon and Schuster (1978), 24.
12. Kelley, "An Endless Script," 43.