

Until you get to know me: Tony Oursler's domestic disturbances

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May. 1, 2012

From television monitors to projections within the gallery cube, the sites of Tony Oursler's art seems to epitomize a survival strategy of second-generation video artists. The artist expanded his moving image practice beyond the cumbersome materiality of its founding technology. The crude domestic dysfunction of his early single-channel compilations *Good Things and Bad Things and Life* (both 1979) were followed by nonsensical monologues enacted by distorted human faces projected upon three-dimensional doll forms, such as *Judy: Horrertic doll* (1994) (Figure 1). His work developed from single-channel videotapes of the 1970s to video projections in atmospherically contingent spaces of open-air public grounds. The material anchor of the television monitor made way for gaseous ephemerality. In 2000, the artist exhibited *The Influence Machine*. Displayed after dark in Madison Square Park, New York, the projections originate in Oursler's research into the history of television and its codependent development with spiritualist practices at the end of the nineteenth century. Art historian Liz Kotz writes, "For art-world viewers, Oursler's new projections succeeded in freeing video from its historical containment in the monitor or TV set." His work seems to exemplify the growing preference for "the luminous image freed from its ungainly technical support."⁽¹⁾ However, the television apparatus, understood in its historical character, remains central to the artist's work. The projections of *The Influence Machine* continue Oursler's investigation of television's determination of social relations by means of its paradoxically foundational evanescence, its will to exceed "its ungainly technical support."

Oursler's emphasis upon the television apparatus and its effects casts him against the cinematic turn among contemporary video projection artists. *The Influence Machine* exemplifies this commitment. Media historian Stefan Andriopoulos chronicles in his great article "Psychic Television" much of the same history of the technological imaginary that Oursler presents in his timeline *TIMESTREAM: I HATE THE DARK, I LOVE THE LIGHT* (2000).⁽²⁾ Following the research of Andriopoulos and the artist, television appears based precisely on the technical evanescence of telesight sought by spiritualists. Questions of technological transformation and technical disappearance were imperative from the medium's

The artist continues his exploration of entrapment in another early sketch, his most violent. In close-up, Oursler's video camera records two shallow cups, like white paper petri dishes or drinking glad covers, hold one common housefly each, held in the small space by clear plastic wrap. As in other tapes, Oursler provides an affected voice-over. Here he performs in a lilting cadence. "I'm a really nice guy ... I'm a really nice guy ..." Oursler grasps the cups with their struggling flies. "I'm a really nice guy, until you get to know me ..." His thumbs reach over the plastic wrap and press upon the houseflies. He squishes them, kills them. "Then you'll wish that you never knew me at all ..." As he extinguishes the insects, Oursler punctuates his words with squelch sound-effects in exaggeration of the crinkling plastic wrap. Generally, one might not weigh with any depth the killing of a housefly, but here Oursler's executions appall. He kills for the wrong reasons. That is to say, not culturally legitimated reasons: not out of health concerns or even annoyance. Rather, for amusement. In the high-contrast video image, the black bodies of the houseflies quiver in sharp distinction against the bright white paper: the googly eye of the goldfish tape is now formed by living creatures. While the goldfish swiftly evaded Oursler's intrusion, here the houseflies perform as representations of anxious movement, crude irises paired with those of our own darting eyes as we watch Oursler's behavior. In the brief moments of the videotape, the houseflies are the artist's victims. But Oursler's images are ours to remember.

Sadistic humor and exploitation underlie Oursler's crude exaggerations of social interaction. The artist stages scenarios of perversion, distress, and exhaustion. Performances of distorted etiquette within irreverent contexts highlight the arbitrary logic of cultural norms. His early experiments are similar in form to the vignettes produced throughout the 1970s by William Wegman with his Weimaraner dogs and Terry Fox's *The Children's Tapes* (1974). However Oursler's work exhibits a more sustained tone of aggression than that found among his contemporaries. His early videotapes are bound by a preoccupation with the sinister possibilities of interpersonal relations. Oursler asserts dysfunction in the diverse situations encountered by his raw avatars. Lurid humor does not punctuate the everyday, as it might for Wegman or Fox, rather defines it. Dissonances between interior and exterior spaces of the home, the mind, and the television dominate Oursler's work. Such dissonance is exemplified by *Life* (Figure 2). In a one-minute episode, Oursler's camera is fixed on a painting of a house on the crest of a nondescript hill. On its left, a twisted tree stands in silhouette, and on the right a row of power lines recedes into illusory space behind the house. Its chimney emits

brush-mark smoke into a sky defined from the ground only by lighter tonalities of leaden pigment. A figure in white silhouette lays prone at the juncture of the house and the curve of the hill. Below the figure is a circular cut in Oursler's painting. Thin, horizontal lines of stark black and white shift remarkably like an out of register television screen. Oursler speaks in fateful voice-over: "This house is built over a uranium deposit. Whenever you go to sleep in it you wake up tired." Oursler zooms in as white fluid drips down from the figure into the abstract lines. The screen fades out to black.

The planar surface of Oursler's painting supports conflicting visual codes. The perspective of the consecutively shrinking utility poles contrasts the white paint expelled by the undefined figure. Artificial, illusory depth of field commingles with gravity-induced action occurring within the recorded time of the videotape. The house and "uranium deposit" are centrally located in Oursler's frame. Perhaps intimating the March 1979 meltdown at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant, or more generally, late Cold War fear of uncontrolled dispersion of radioactivity, Oursler presents a circumstance beyond the control of the effected. We simply see the representation of destruction. There is no causal narrative or responding action, no particular protagonist. Oursler alerts us to the danger of this house for anyone who sleeps there. No occupant can escape a general exhaustion. The toxic waste appears as a scrambled television. The figure seeps into the lines, into an annihilating turn from figuration to abstraction. This segment of *Life*, Oursler's slice of life, suggests the artist's growing preoccupation with the affects of television. The trauma of receiving psychical and physical distress from a remote source increasingly permeated his early work. Video, through its connection with television, allowed Oursler to "Actually get into the box itself."⁽³⁾ Within the scenarios of his videotapes, the television apparatus becomes the central source of distressing transmissions.

In his 1984 installation *L7-L5* (Figure 3), an up-faced television illuminates a house frame and mirrors set on top of its screen. The painted house and uranium deposit of the *Life* episode become a three-dimensional installation. The house's foundation is here the television and its flickering images. Mirrors within the open-walled house frame distort its light emissions. In the refracted video we see the hands of Gloria, a respondent to Oursler's *Village Voice* advertisement for persons who encountered extraterrestrials. Gloria draws her bedroom and her encounter there with alien beings. She describes how the figures, coming to

her as midnight apparitions, dissolve into squares of light.⁴ "L7" refers to the 1950s slang for a person who is a square. "L5" refers to the area between the earth and moon in which an object can achieve perpetual orbit.⁵ Oursler writes:

"The space after the light leaves the monitor, where life begins and the machine ends -- the living rooms and bedrooms -- these are the interesting spaces. The reflections are then trapped to resonate in sculptural form, so in essence the disembodied is re-contextualized in the installation. I was trying to take images off the TV screen and put them into a new situation."⁽⁶⁾

Oursler's use of the similar alphanumeric designation for social dysfunction and interstellar stasis exemplify his ambitions for the television signal beyond the "household furniture" of its conventional container. Gloria's "squares of light" achieve double meaning as a reference to her psychological disturbance and to the square form of the television apparatus. Oursler suggests that the television signal is a channel for otherworldly transmission perhaps as delusional as satellite cable programming.

Oursler's practice turned from scenarios enacted for a fixed camera position to installation pieces built around the ephemeral presence of the television signal. The deeper Oursler explored the apparatus -- that is, the deeper he plumbed "into the box itself" -- the further his scope shifted to subjects receiving televisual information. The psychological affects of viewership became the subject of his "sculpture of disembodied television."⁽⁷⁾ Exaggerated mania of television viewers became the content of the artist's installations, such as Judy: Horrertic doll. No longer staging events against painted backdrops for a fixed Portapak camera, now the avatars appear in the gallery space as three-dimensional objects. Responses to the television apparatus determine the structure of the works rather than the narrative conventions of its popular content. The expressive faces of neurotic recipients of television's signal are projected against head-like forms. The avatars' faces are brightly lit head-on and from below, distorting the exaggerated contortions of their features. The projector beam warps as it passes around the surface of the object, further upsetting their presence. The television monitor becomes the unseen antagonist of Oursler's distressed characters: the faces are repulsed and transfixed by the light sources that constitute their tenuous presence (Figure 4). Oursler presents the results of abstract affects or "influences" from remote beings and

technology in *The Influence Machine*. The content of Oursler's video projections draw from events in the invention of television. This historical consciousness marks a transformation in his work that engages the technological precedents of interdisciplinary experimentation and asserts an ambivalent position that is critical to contemporary relationships with digital media. Oursler's direct use of documents and events from the history of television, and his exploration of cultural responses to the psychological effects of digital communications, distinguishes his work from the cinematic inspirations and aspirations of his fellow video-projection artists.

For the exhibition *Tony Oursler -- Introjection: Mid-Career Survey 1976 -- 1999* at the Williams College Museum of Art, Oursler produced *I hate the dark, I love the light*, a timeline of events in the development of optics. Charting data from fifth- to second-century B.C. thru 1999, from the first description of the camera obscura by the Chinese philosopher Mo Ti to Lene Vestergaard Hau's deceleration of light (effectively achieving live slow motion), Oursler charted events in the development of visual augmentation.(8) "I was fascinated by how technologies like electric light, film, optics, radio, and the codification of the rainbow interrelated over time. I found myself being lured back into the historical labyrinth by a number of interests -- the invention of television in particular. [...] My general theme was mimetic technology, that is, technology that could be perceived as a direct extension of psychological states."(9) In 2000, Oursler expanded the timeline under the title *TIMESTREAM* for a website project with the Museum of Modern Art, New York. He organized the information in six categories: Religion / Mythology / Philosophy, Optics / Still & Moving Images, Computers / The Internet, Physics / Mechanics / Electronics, Telecommunications, and Quackery / The Occult / Spiritualism. Each color-coded chronology featured information pertinent to the artist's fascination with the interrelation of visual phenomena and the instruments developed to augment them.

Oursler's research for *TIMESTREAM* resulted in *The Influence Machine*. The artist reprinted his research for the exhibition catalogue. Across twenty-four pages he charts a diverse array of innovations in optics. "The Influence Machine took the advent of telecommunications as its point of departure and attempted to work with its discoveries in relation to the 'deep media structures.'"(10) The exhibition title follows the 1919 article by the early psychoanalyst Victor Tausk, "On the Origins of the 'Influencing Machine' in Schizophrenia."(11) The

subjects of Tausk's case studies believed themselves the recipients of messages from remote sources. The afflicting apparatus his patient's described is similar to a television. The disturbed, affected figures of Oursler's doll projections echo these troubled receivers. In *The Influence Machine*, Oursler extrapolates his research into optics and its close ties with spiritualist practices. His video projections are materially divorced from the television apparatus but are inspired by the imagination of its history. Paranormal speculation and its association with the technological imaginary intermingle in *The Influence Machine*.

The "Medium" and "Chorus" projections emit diverse references. As if mixed from competing frequencies, the voices utter incomplete sentences and gibberish among bits of data from their inspirations. Garbled fragments of historical exposition and proper names reference Paul Gottlieb Nipkow, inventor of the "electric telescope" in 1889; John Baird, constructor of the first working television in 1921 based on Nipkow's work; and the Fox sisters of Rochester who in 1848 claimed the ability to communicate with the spirit named "Mr. Split-foot."⁽¹²⁾ Speaker systems that accompanied the steam clouds give haunting voices to the fleeting visibility of the projected video images. Each night from the 19th through the 31st of October 2000, *The Influence Machine* flickered in Madison Square Park. Multiple video projections displayed human faces against the tree foliage of the park grounds and dense clouds of artificially generated steam. The faces achieve intermittent solidity. Eyes, mouths, and noses shimmered in and out of recognition on their irregular, shifting support of leaves and gaseous masses. Consider this excerpt from the monologue of *Talking Light*, a streetlamp equipped with a speaker adjacent to the projections. I preserve Oursler's spelling and punctuation:

"Telecommunications systems are paradoxical in that they show us signs, pictures, sounds, and language, of the world, yet we are, in some way, profoundly, disconnected from that world ... Your mind is engaged, yet, you are eyesolated physically, psychologically ... There is a word for this tendency, Discourporative, the Discourporative Impulse ... Yes, the Discourporative Impulse describes what we all seem to be involved in: , shedding the physical body for the ethereal, uuuutohpean, virtual presence, and the promises of ultimate interconnectivity. What do you think? I like the word Discouporative even though it seems fancy, it is direct and precise, you understand it, OK. You lose your body, your mind, is free."⁽¹³⁾

The Influence Machine complicates Kotz's observation of the curious absence of speech from the emphatically pictorial space of contemporary video installation.¹⁴ Oursler's "Discourporative Impulse" appears in counterpoint to the "monumental"⁽¹⁵⁾ video-projection works of Stan Douglas and Diane Thater cited by Kotz. Oursler's disembodied heads, constituted only by drifting clouds of steam and speaking incessantly to the experience of telecommunications systems as both freeing and "eyesolating," seem to exemplify an ambivalent "space between screens" Kotz does not find in the cinematic video-projections of Oursler's colleagues. His paroxysmal heads float free of corporeal worries in hopes of "ultimate interconnectivity." The ephemerality of the projector beam -- dispersed, shifting, variable -- is the subject of *The Influence Machine*. Projection as a mode of dubious communication and presence, the existential crisis of the illumination itself and the information we ask it to transmit, is Oursler's central concern. Kotz writes, "In video, scanning and projection are means of translating electronic signals into a two-dimensional picture: what was previously inside the monitor (phosphorescent pixels on an enclosed glass screen) is now transferred to the larger container of the room or screen."⁽¹⁶⁾ In the case of Oursler's *The Influence Machine*, the supposed multi-dimensionality of his gaseous supports expands the electronic signal beyond the monitor so that the original spirits of the apparatus may achieve the "ultimate connectivity" for which they initially aspired.

Like Oursler, Stefan Andriopoulos cites Baird and Nipkow in his account of the interdependence of spiritualist activity and late nineteenth-century electrical engineering.⁽¹⁷⁾ Andriopoulos writes:

"While spiritualism serves as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the invention of electrical television, the emerging technology simultaneously fulfills the very same function for spiritualist research on psychic telesight. The notion that the concept of television emerged from a two-directional exchange between occultism and technology immediately gains plausibility when recalling equivalent coinages such as telegraphy, telepathy, telephony, telekinesis, or teleplasty."⁽¹⁸⁾

This equivalence of semantic and technologic experimentation resonates with Oursler's garbled monologues in *The Influence Machine*. Part concrete poetry in the exhibition catalog

and part cacophonous litany in the installation, Oursler's texts express the euphoria and anxiety of virtual presence. Says a "Chorus" projection:

"I am no longer there -- air flare electromagnetic radiation shifting higher and higher all the way to the color red dead detached head bled of life, now it comes back, black black black black is the color of my eyes I can't see you, where are you? Signal is weak! ... dream victims of vexing vapors charge discharge empty thoughts wash windy flat wandering hollow glass light sensitivity of the eye ..." (19)

"The Technician" projection, text-as-image against fence and bushes:

"WHO EXACTLY ARE YOU?" 63&@*^vuo5%90 ARE U THERE?? LET'S DO THE COUNTDOWN STABILIZE ITC we r I'm contacting you ..." (20)

Consider Oursler's photographic documentation of his projections. They illustrate the first pages of the exhibition catalog. All are taken from a position directly facing the projector beam. Oursler aims his camera into the light source. Face to "face" with the steam and blinding projector lens, Oursler gives us a view back into the apparatus. The projector, like the monitor before it, emits the euphoric and sinister imagination of telecommunication. The "two-directional exchange" of telepathic and televisual aspirations is affirmed as direct engagement with television. Oursler strove to "actually get in the set itself" in his single-channel videotapes of the 1970s. In *The Influence Machine*, he utilizes the expansive transference of projection to assert what was always there: the historical character of "vexing vapors," the fascination and alarm of "seeing at a distance."

1 Liz Kotz, "Video Projection: The Space Between Screens" (revision), *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate and Afterall Press, 2008), p. 371. Originally published in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (London: Basil Blackwell, 2004).

2 Stefan Andriopoulos, "Psychic Television," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Spring 2005), p. 618-637;

and Tony Oursler, *The Influence Machine* (New York: New York Public Art Fund and London: Artangel, 2000).

3 Tony Oursler in "Endless Script: A Conversation with Tony Oursler by Mike Kelley," *Tony Oursler -- Introjection: Mid-Career Survey 1976 - 1999*, curated by Deborah Rothschild (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Williams College Museum of Art, 1999), p. 38.

4 Deborah Rothschild, "Introjection: In Oursler's world, no one escapes its unbidden influences," *Tony Oursler -- Introjection*, p. 17.

5 Ibid.

6 Tony Oursler in "Endless Script," *Tony Oursler -- Introjection*, p. 47.

7 Rothschild, "Introjection," *Tony Oursler -- Introjection*, p. 18.

8 Tony Oursler, "I hate the dark, I love the light," *Tony Oursler -- Introjection*, p. 102 - 111.

9 Tony Oursler in "Smoke and Mirrors: Influence Machine, a conversation between Tony Oursler and Louise Neri," *The Influence Machine*, p. 56.

10 Ibid., p. 58.

11 Victor Tausk, "On the Origins of the 'Influencing Machine' in Schizophrenia," trans. Dorian Feigenbaum, *Journal of Psychotherapy Practice and Research* 1:2 (Spring 1992), p. 184-206. Originally published in German as "Über die Entstehung des 'Beeinflussungsapparates' in der Schizophrenie" in *Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse* (1919).

12 See transcript of "Medium" and "Chorus" monologue in Oursler, *The Influence Machine*, p. 36 and p. 38.

13 Oursler, *The Influence Machine*, p. 43. 14 Kotz, p. 376.

15 Ibid., p. 371.

16 Ibid., p. 384.

17 Andriopoulos, p. 618 and p. 624. 18 Ibid., p. 623.

19 Oursler, "Chorus," *The Influence Machine*, p. 40.

20 Oursler, "The Technician," *The Influence Machine*, p. 42.