

L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

Artforum

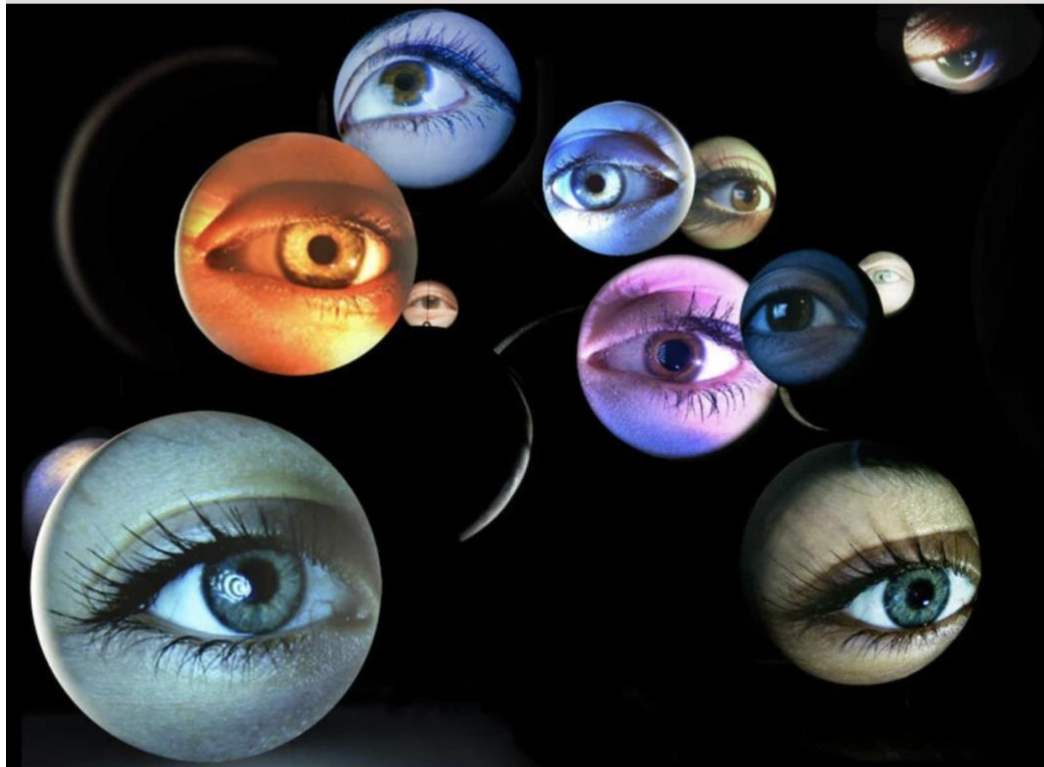
27 January 2021

ARTFORUM

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January 27, 2021

Must See: What's on Worldwide



Tony Oursler at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Taiwan

The retrospective “Black Box” presents four decades of the American multimedia artist’s video installations, experimental films, and sculptures. Through May 16.



“Working Together: The Photographers of the Kamoinge Workshop” at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

“Their stated objective was straightforward: to offer a different image of Black life.”
Through March 28.



Deborah Roberts and Torbjørn Rødland at the Contemporary Austin

Two new exhibitions, Austin-based artist Roberts’s “I’m” and Norwegian photographer Rødland’s “Bible Eye,” grace the Contemporary.
Through August 15

Highlight: São Paulo



In São Paulo, be sure not to miss Modernist icon Beatriz Milhazes at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, painter Antonio Dias at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art, Antonio Henrique Amaral at Instituto Tomie Ohtake, and American sculptor Melvin Edwards at the Museu Afrobrasil. Learn about the city’s history of video art from anywhere with “Video MAC,” online via the Museu de Arte Contemporânea.



Art Club2000 at Artists Space, New York

“Anthropologizing themselves, they were an unlikely example of the quasi-ethnographic position that so many artists continue to inhabit today.”

Through January 30.



Josh Fox at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

Tickets are now on sale to view Fox’s performance *The Truth Has Changed (2021 Edition)*, “a warning and a way forward for our besieged democracy,” online via the Walker.

January 29–February 1.

And more...

Lucas Samaras and David Velasco discuss the January/February cover

Kuala Lumpur: Zulkifli Lee at Taksu Gallery

Woodstock, Oxfordshire: Cecily Brown at the Blenheim Art Foundation

Must Sees: From Los Angeles, Berlin, New York, London, Chicago and Toronto

LISSON GALLERY

Tatler Hong Kong
20 January 2021

Tatler
HONG KONG

Tony Oursler On His New Exhibition In Taiwan—And Why Smartphones Are Like Drugs



Tony Oursler with one of his video works, this one projected into a plume of smoke (Photo: Courtesy of Tony Oursler and Lehmann Maupin)



By Oliver Giles

January 20, 2021

Tony Oursler's video installations offer a revelatory, and sometimes creepy, perspective on our collective obsession with technology. A new exhibition at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts brings his life's work into focus

Artist [Tony Oursler](#) has spent the past 50 years making eerie installations that pose big questions about humanity's future. Will artificial intelligence help us or harm us? Is it possible to end our addiction to [smartphones](#)? Are we in charge or have machines already taken over? But last year, when the [pandemic](#) tore across continents and millions of lives hung in the balance, Oursler took a step into the past.

"I shrunk my studio down to just a table—it was a little bit like going back to the Seventies or Eighties," Oursler says, speaking over the phone from his home in [New York](#). "Most of the time I was alone, and it was a chance to go back to enjoying creativity in a very classic sense. It was just me and some clay or a piece of paper or a video [camera](#)."

Oursler also spent a large chunk of the year digging through his archives to choose works for *Black Box*, a retrospective exhibition opening on January 23 at the [Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts](#) in Taiwan. Showcasing pieces made from the 1970s to the present day, *Black Box* is Oursler's first major museum show in Asia and one of the largest projects of his career. "It is a great honour to have people interested in my work in Asia, and it has been such a journey looking back at my work," he says.



Obscura (2014) by Tony Oursler, which features videos of eyes projected on to sculptural orbs. The eyes stare and blink at gallery-goers as they walk past (Photo: Courtesy of Tony Oursler and Lehmann Maupin)

FIRST ENCOUNTER

A pioneer of video art, Oursler started experimenting with the medium when he was a student at the [California Institute of Arts](#) in the 1970s. "I used the first video camera ever designed by Sony, the Portapak, which came out in 1967. I started using them in 1976 when they were kind of dumped into the art department," Oursler recalls. His early experiments were scripted short [films](#), many of which were populated by creepy casts of dolls and explored religion, sex and death—sometimes comically, sometimes morbidly.

One of these videotapes, *Grand Mal*, released in 1981, is a 23-minute series of hallucinatory, loosely connected moralistic tales about good and evil acted out by a mixture of cardboard cut-out characters and actors smothered in body paint, all filmed in a grainy, shaky style. “Regardless of the artistic value of those tapes, I’m proud of being a part of that moment in history where we went from plastic arts to digital,” Oursler says. “The camera opened everything up for my generation.”

“Television was really a drug, but it was never controlled like a drug. People are realising the same thing about smartphones”

— Tony Oursler

Oursler’s art has developed in step with the advancement of technology. By the mid-Eighties, he had moved beyond tapes and started constructing elaborate installations filled with boxy TVs playing videos on a loop. A few years later, he began working with projectors, casting videos of faces on to mannequins and sculptures. Slowly Oursler made those images more abstract, reducing them to recordings of a single eye or mouth screened on bulbous orbs. He now makes projections large enough to cover the sides of buildings, as he has done on galleries around the world, and to reach the tops of trees, where characters in his videos float like ghosts among the leaves.

As well as enabling the making of his art, technology—and its exponential growth—is the subject of Oursler’s work. “I’m in the TV generation and the computer generation,” he says. “Television was really a drug, but it was never really controlled like a drug, but I think it should’ve been in retrospect. And I think people are now realising the same thing about smartphones.

“In 1980 there was, I believe, one machine that could capture 30 seconds of digital TV. And that was a million-dollar machine. Now you’ve got in your pocket something that’s got tens of thousands of times that computing power, yet what do people do with that technology? They use it to become distracted, they use it to mesmerise themselves, they use it to nullify themselves to some degree. What at one time was an information-gathering machine, a focusing machine, a calculating machine is now kind of inverted into a dystopian gadget used to manipulate consciousness in the direction of distraction and spectacle.”



Kceps (2005), an example of how Oursler sometimes reduces the face to eyes and mouths (Photo: Courtesy of Tony Oursler and Lehmann Maupin)

EXPLORING TECHNOLOGY

Oursler's exploration of technology is part of what the team at KMFA believes makes his work relevant to show in Taiwan. "Taiwan continues to strengthen its position as a technological powerhouse," says Alice Ko Nien-pu, who is co-curating *Black Box*. "Global companies such as Google, IBM and Microsoft continue to invest in Taiwan's artificial intelligence sector. As Oursler's work elaborates on questions raised by research and practices in technology, media, telecommunications and human-computer interaction, it can definitely resonate with people in Taiwan."

Despite his scepticism, Oursler says he is at heart an optimist. "Smart people understand the social issues with smartphones at this point," he says. "I think that people will recapture this space and use it for creative endeavours."

Oursler has dedicated much of his career to preserving video as a medium for experimentation, pushing against the dominant, slick aesthetic of Hollywood films and Netflix shows. "There were a lot of people doing interesting things with film until Hollywood figured out how to commodify video," he says. "Then it became rigid: the editing became standardised, movie theatres became standardised and proscribed a proscenium set-up, and we got locked into this spectacle culture."

The sculptural quality of most of Oursler's work immediately sets it apart from mainstream cinema and most video art, as does his use of dialogue. Many of his pieces intermittently shriek, sing, shout or whisper, often making viewers jump when they shatter the silence in galleries. When Oursler had a show in Hong Kong in 2016 at Lehmann Maupin gallery, which has represented him since the Nineties, his pieces sometimes seemed to be talking to visitors. "I don't even know myself," one portrait murmured. "I'm just another face in the crowd," another said.

Sound is one of the ways Oursler tries to seize the attention of gallery-goers. "Art can activate the viewer," says Oursler. "The real difference between popular culture and art is that with popular culture you pay the admission price and after that nobody really cares what the audience thinks or does—you're passive, you're going through a prescribed ritual. But with art, that's not the case." At an exhibition, you decide what you want to look at, how long you look at it for and what conclusions you draw.

GHOSTLY PAST

The murmurings of Oursler's works have led many critics to describe his art as frightening: his projections can seem like apparitions, especially when they whisper spine-chilling statements in dark, quiet galleries, float across walls or levitate in forests. Some of his videos also explicitly engage with the paranormal and feature ghosts, angels and devils.

An interest in the supernatural has been passed down through Oursler's family: his grandfather, Charles Fulton Oursler, was an amateur magician, journalist, author and Hollywood screenwriter, who in his early life was an active campaigner against the craze for seances and spirit mediums that arose in the 1920s. Then, after recovering from alcoholism, he renounced his early agnosticism and became a fervent Roman Catholic until his death. His son, Tony Oursler's father, was editor in chief of the Christian magazine *Guideposts*, then founded a spin-off publication, Angels on Earth, which features stores of divine intervention. It is still in print.

Oursler was raised Catholic and has spent decades building an archive of more than 15,000 artefacts relating to the history of stage magic, demonology, cryptozoology, hypnotism, fairies, cults, UFOs and dozens of other occult topics, but he renounces all of them. "I believe in art," he says. "I believe in the redemptive power and the positivity of art. I am tagged a little bit with this tie to the occult. People ask, 'Have you spoken to ghosts? Are you interested in the Ouija board?' I'm not that person. But I'm very interested in the fact that other people are interested in them."

Ultimately, Oursler says, he uses imagery from the occult as a way to explore the way people blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, and how individuals choose to view the world. "I'm very interested in parallel perspectives on reality," he says. "As an artist, it's important to look at people's beliefs and their leaps of faith. There's something really wonderful about leaps of faith, but there's also something really spooky about them—as you can see with certain cults, there can be disastrous results."



Works from Oursler's Caricatures series, photographed at his 2013 exhibition at the Pinchuk Art Centre in Kiev, Ukraine (Photo: Courtesy of Tony Oursler and Lehmann Maupin)

DIGITAL CITIZENS

In a way, this leads back to Oursler's obsession with technology. The internet now has the power to shape people's beliefs at least as much as religion did in the past. Where people once turned to a holy book for instruction, they might now open YouTube or post on Reddit, soliciting advice from millions of strangers. But this global network has not led to the creation of universal truths: it has fragmented facts into millions of pieces, leading to ever more troubling beliefs. "It's fascinating, the kind of conspiratorial storytelling that occurs on the internet," says Oursler.

"People ask, 'Have you spoken to ghosts? Are you interested in the Ouija board?'"

— Tony Oursler



Judy (1994), one of Oursler's first pieces made by projecting videos on to human-like forms to build eerie, large-scale installations (Photo: Courtesy of Tony Oursler and Lehmann Maupin)

“The fake news. The paranoid rants. This has all come extremely rapidly to the forefront of pop culture.”

All of these topics are touched upon in Oursler’s pieces that are going on show at KMFA this month, as is his interest in ecology, which is reflected in his recent works projecting images into trees. “The KMFA has beautiful grounds and we’re going to try to populate them with a kind of phantasmagorical projection outside for a week or so,” he says.

The show has been in the works for more than two years: Oursler first visited Taiwan in 2019 to brainstorm ideas with the team. He is travelling to Taiwan again to instal and open the show. “We’ll start the installation over Zoom while I’m in quarantine, then finish it when I’m out,” he says.

Oursler’s visit to Taiwan in 2019 deeply moved him: he spent days with the KMFA curators, whom he praises profusely, and also explored the National Palace Museum in Taipei, which has the largest collection of ancient Chinese art in the world. “It was just mindblowing,” he says. “Wandering around that museum was a real high point in my life, I’d say—and hosting this show in Taiwan will be, too. How often do you have the chance to do something like this: to bring your life’s work together in a meaningful way?”

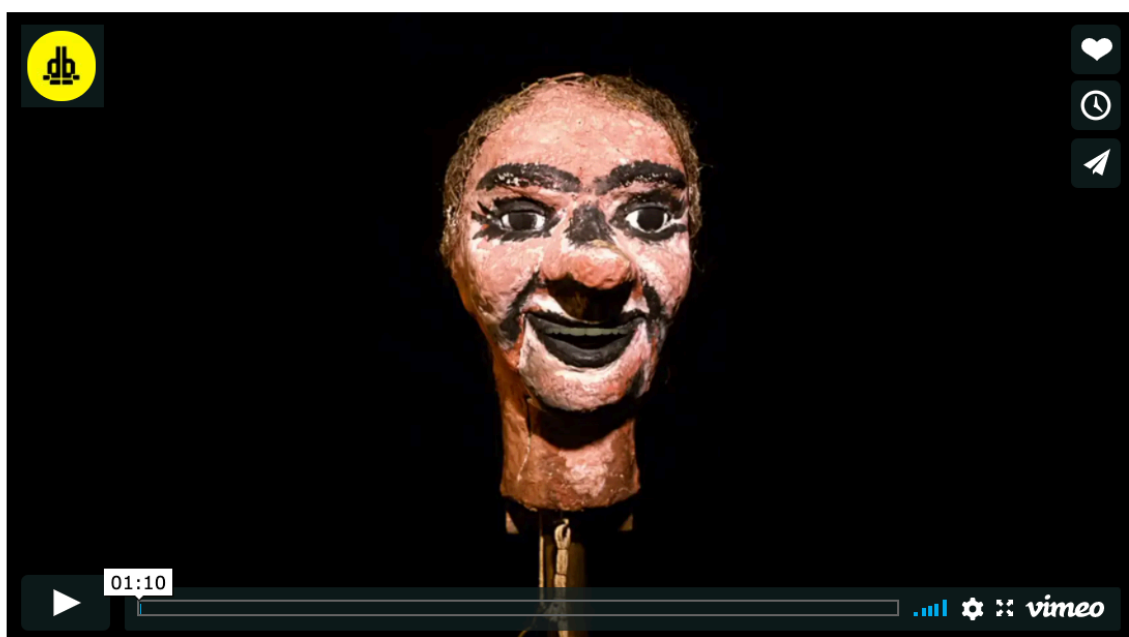
Tony Oursler: Black Box runs from January 23 to May 16 at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Taiwan



artist tony oursler shares a message of hope during coronavirus lockdown

artists share messages of hope: as the population of italy, and many other parts of the world, continue to endure lockdown conditions as a result of the **COVID-19** pandemic, designboom — whose headquarters is in milan — has reached out to artists to share messages of hope with our readers worldwide. since beginning the initiative, dedications have been kindly contributed to us by olafur eliasson, david shrigley, julian charrière, doug aitken, monica bonvicini, and tomás saraceno.

new york based artist **tony oursler** now sends us a video transmission via ventriloquist sculpture **stooky bill**, who invites our readers to share their insights, passion and creative forces during this time. we spoke with oursler more about bill, the media, and what he's optimistic about for the future...



designboom: *why stooky bill? what is his significance to you, and what drew you to him?*

tony oursler: the sculpture was used by john logie baird, the scottish inventor of the mechanical television. the TV pioneer wanted to record and transmit a visage, but the intense amount of light needed for the apparatus to see an image would have burned the skin of anyone who was in front of the camera. so, he used a ventriloquist dummy to be the first 'human' figure to be transmitted in electronic form. bill helped us transition into a new age — he sacrificed much for our culture, always with a smile, as his skin peeled and cracked, and hair singed. he's a vestigial figure, and also a reminder of the power of the handmade. anyone can do this.



untitled drawing, 11 1/2 x 14, acrylic on paper

designboom: *you've referred critically to telecommunications / media — 'watching television: the corrosive, deadly, beautiful color of electronic waves washing over flesh' (from blue dilemma, 2011). what's your take on the rapid escalation of media during the pandemic?*

tony oursler: pros and cons — people are back in their bodies. we are completely aware of real space and distance, as our lives depend on it. it's a recalibration of the real and virtual. I love that more people are finding digital ways to be closer, rather than remain in a digital narcissistic feedback loop. mix in

media monopolies, propaganda and a hyper-polarized public, and it turns out we are living in a moment which reflects a crisis beyond health. conspiracy is the new religion for the disenfranchised.



untitled drawing, 11 1/2 x 14, acrylic on paper

designboom: *do you hope that people take this time to become more immediate, and look inside themselves...rather than overly engaging in the 'outside' (media)?*

tony oursler: I hope infinitely for creative activation — a once in a lifetime pause to rethink things is where many of us are now. we can only hope that it's a safe time for introspection without too much fear and terror.



the first known photograph of a moving image produced by baird's 'televisor', as reported in *the times* on january 28, 1926 (the subject is baird's business partner oliver hutchinson)

designboom: *what are you afraid of regarding the future? what are you optimistic about?*

tony oursler: afraid that the dark side of capitalism may have won, and we are living in one big conflict algorithm. we need new models. I'm optimistic that the arts and creative forces in all our endeavors can move things in the right direction, and can activate.

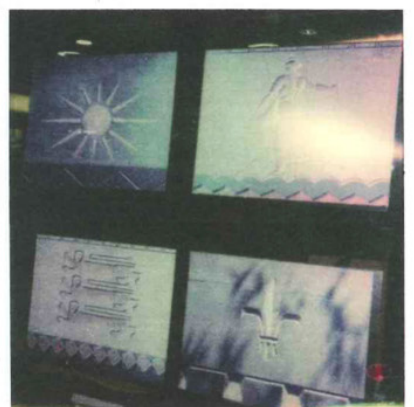
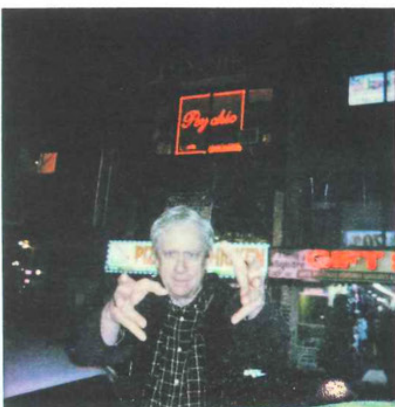
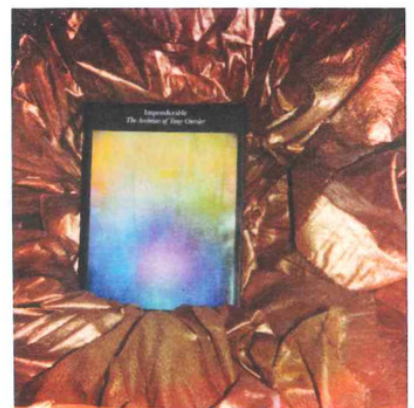
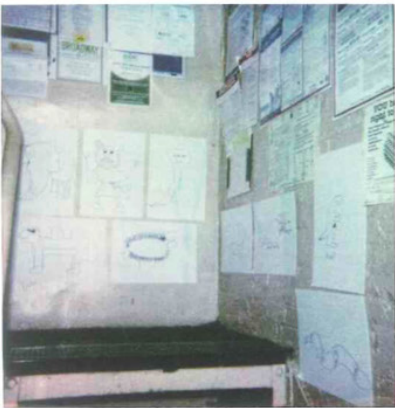
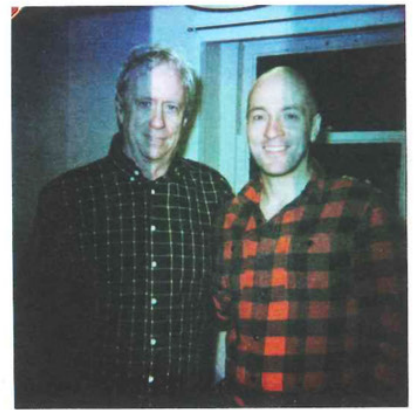
discover more of oursler's work on [his instagram](#), and at [lehmann maupin](#) and [lisson gallery](#).

Practical Magic

Playwright, musician and actor **Leah Hennessey** takes artist **Tony Oursler** to see Derren Brown on Broadway and the illusion begins.

THE FIRST WORK OF TONY OURSLER'S I ever encountered was a head crammed under a mattress muttering "Fuck you, fuck you." I was six years old, and I was shocked. The face was a film, projected on the fabric of the stuffed head. Its eyes seemed to search the room; was it looking for a singular target for this obscene mantra? Was there one among us who might be exempt? I wanted to be spotted by those flickering eyes but I suspected, in horror, that the Fuck You Head could *not* see me. Maybe I suspected that its performance was prerecorded or maybe I just picked up on the blinding solipsism of its misanthropy. Being six, the thought that I might never be fully seen or understood had only recently crossed my mind. This was both devastating and deeply inspiring. A nerve was struck. Why did I yearn to be singled out by the cursing, disembodied head under the mattress?

It was 1994 and I was not aware that I had picked a particularly edgy or cool artist as my new favorite. I liked Monet, I liked Warhol, I liked Calder's circus and now I liked Tony Oursler. As eye-rollingly precocious a Manhattan child as I was, I did not, at that time, have a particular passion for contemporary art. I loved going to museums but I went to museums looking mostly for animals and magic. Really, I was obsessed with magic. The invisible world of colorless iridescence, where faeries and ancient gods flitted from one blind spot to another, was the plane on which I spent most of my time, practicing telepathy, telekinesis *Matilda*-style and playing out intricate psychodramas with my invisible friends.



I was also not aware that my childhood hero, Tony Oursler, not only loved magic, but was in fact a sort of magic expert and magic scion. His 2016 film *Imponderable* revolves around the story of his grandfather Fulton Oursler (also known as Tony Oursler in his day, making our Tony, in theory, Tony Oursler III), an amateur magician turned magic debunker. As long as there have been magicians, there have been those who made their name by publicly exposing others' methods. Often these debunkers are magicians themselves; some are rivals or illusionists of a different variety. For instance, entertainers like Fulton Oursler's friend Harry Houdini made a stunt of publicly disproving the powers of spirit mediums and exposing them as frauds. The tradition of the debunker-magician continues today in the work of mentalist Derren Brown, who unmask the devices of faith healers and self-proclaimed psychics.

For those of you who have not seen Derren Brown in action (or didn't read the excellent *New Yorker* piece that got me and my very discerning and cynical friends addicted to him), let it be known that he is a master magician. His brand of mentalism consists of guaranteed-to-blow-your-mind mind reading, couched in pseudo-scientific (like neuro-linguistic programming) and actually scientific (like the power of suggestion) explanations for how the illusion has been achieved through psychological manipulation and simple sleight of hand. It's layer upon layer of misdirection and it works—at least on me—every time. The cognitive dissonance of simultaneous awestruck belief and neurotic analysis of the technique produces in me a flash of The Sublime.

As I descended into the YouTube vortex of Derren Brown, I found myself wondering what someone like Tony Oursler would think of him. Realizing there is no one quite *like* Tony Oursler, I wondered what Tony Oursler in particular would think of Derren Brown. I imagined meeting Tony (who I had only casually stalked at the PS1 Book Fair) and taking him to see Derren Brown's Broadway show, *The Secret*. When *Cultured* asked if I had any ideas for the film issue, I impulsively pitched my fantasy. Cut to me walking through Times Square on my way to meet Tony, searching for psychics. We're going to document our adventure through Polaroids and I'm trying to find a backdrop for a portrait. When I get to the theater, I show him some pictures of neon signs I've found. He scrolls through his phone to show me the pictures *he's* just taken of Times Square psychic shops. Was he location scouting too? "No," he says, "this is just what I do."

Tony is not only a creator; he is also an archivist. His archive, which exists as part of the *Imponderable* show and separately as a book of the same name, is a collection of what Mark Fisher might call "the weird and the eerie." Weird and eerie are not the same as "creepy," a word Tony feels is often inaccurately used to describe his work. The archive contains UFO photographs, occult paraphernalia, pareidolic flower petals, ectoplasm photograms, snapshots of Big Foot, hypnosis posters, Kirlian photographs by David Bowie, reliquaries, aura portraits, meteorite samples and original prints of the Cottingley Fairies. After the show, we visit Tony's studio and he brings out the newest additions to his vast collections of oddities: double exposures of stern-faced mourners from the 1910s composited with ghostly handwriting: "spirit writing," he

Tony Oursler's *Tear of the Cloud* installation for the Public Art Fund (2018)



explains. Tony toys with the idea of attraction to magic as an act of resistance. "People don't want to be left in a lurch of rationalism, where you live in a brutalist world of capitalism," he says. "The attraction to magic is analogous to a real experience, and what is the real experience?"

Watching *The Secret* next to Tony was most definitely a "real experience" for me. At the beginning of the show, the exquisite Derren Brown (who, in the flesh, is markedly more elfin and unreal than the everyman he convincingly passes as on YouTube) swears us to a vow of secrecy. Bound as I am, I cannot elaborate on specific details about the show but many of the scenes, Tony later explains to me, were "classic." Being somewhat of a stage magic aficionado, Tony is less impressed by the efficacy of the trickery than by the aesthetics of certain setups; at one point, Derren is dwarfed by his own giant shadow and at another he blinds himself by wrapping his head in bandages. Tony is delighted by these knowing references to a golden age of magic—"totally 1930s"—but he doesn't seem to see anything particularly novel in Derren's uniquely psychological approach. Perhaps he sees the scientific twist as just another trick of misdirection: something pseudo-intellectual and shiny to distract from the simplicity of these ancient illusions. I, on the other hand, am completely destabilized. I am spellbound by Derren's showmanship. Every mistake he makes seems deliberate, which somehow heightens his believability. The more I doubt, the more I analyze, the more I am carried away.

Derren's magic relies heavily on audience participation. He himself admits that he employs some kind of secret rubric for assessing audience members' psychological suggestibility and knowingly targets people who will most easily be hypnotized or fooled. Being at the extreme gullibility end of the suggestibility spectrum, I watch his (definitely sometimes random) selection of participants with an almost unbearable mixture of utter terror and desperate yearning. I want so badly to be called up on stage while the ugly fear that it could actually happen makes me sick to my stomach. This, I suppose, is something of the *jouissance* that must drive people to create and attend immersive theater. Perhaps I can find some forgiveness in my heart for the friends I've judged too harshly for loving *Sleep No More*. I think again of the seeking eyes of Tony's sculptures and my longing to be/fear of being looked at. I ask Tony if he's ever used artificial intelligence or motion sensors in his work because I always feel like I am being watched by his creations. "That's kind of why I don't have to," he replies.

The other truly eerie aspect of Derren's performance, I later realize, is the possibility that he can predict our thoughts and actions precisely because we are so predictable. It's as if he has, through the trappings of stagecraft, fixed the number of possible reactions and thoughts as a limited set, and is simply selecting from a short list of multiple choices. If his foresights and telepathy are not "magical" then our behavior must be as mechanical as that of an automaton. "I've always had these theories," Tony says, "that people are somehow strangely limited in the

sense that if you charted somebody's interactions through a day—the amount of words they use, the level of communication with which they interact with other people—they're probably so much simpler than how they imagine themselves."

The debunking of magic has always had to do with establishing which kind of magic should be believed. Efforts to establish stage magic over spiritualism, Christianity over witchcraft, witchcraft over capitalism or psychology over mind reading are, in a way, acts of deconstruction. "We live in a culture where, in the arts, a lot has been deconstructed; but if it's just a cultural critique and it's not offering a new paradigm, that's a problem," Tony says. As I walk home, seeing faces in the trees, making paranoid, nonlinear connections between Tony and Derren, I am overcome by a sense of unreality. Some of the Polaroids from the evening are still developing and part of me wonders if either of the two magicians will even show up on film. I find myself imagining that my attraction to Tony's piece in 1994 was somehow a flash of foresight, a presentiment of this encounter. I wonder if the whole audience of *The Secret* was made up of plants, if the whole show was staged just for me. For a moment, anything seems possible. I take the pictures out of my bag to check, but the fact that they both show up in the photos might only prove that they're spirits.

GARAGE



ART | By PAIGE KATHERINE BRADLEY | Oct 8 2018, 3:34pm

Tony Oursler Is (Still) Not Afraid To Reference or Not Reference

In a new Public Art Fund project, the video art pioneer and onetime Bowie collaborator is looking to Edgar Allan Poe and Grandmaster Flash.

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TWEET



Fittingly enough for an artist raised Roman Catholic (and [a David Bowie collaborator](#)), Tony Oursler's work in video, sculpture, and installation incorporates a catholicity of references taken from art history, the development of modern technology, and even the occult. Since the 1980s, he has been exploding the authoritative transmission style of early broadcast television into fractured narratives, as if foreshadowing the practically inescapable media climate of today in which truth is less about facts than about stories which compete to win hearts, minds, and above all, attention. For his second project with Public Art Fund—his

first [was in the year 2000](#)—Oursler has created a new video installation titled “Tear of the Cloud,” which will be projected directly onto the West 69th Street Transfer Bridge gantry on the Hudson River starting on October 10, and will remain on view through the end of the month. Here, he discusses the process of putting it all together, and the rich history of the Hudson River Valley region that inspired the piece.

(And yes: that headline is [a Lady Gaga reference](#). Because every time you watch that video, another star is born.)

GARAGE: Tell us about the beginning of this project, and how your approach to it may have differed from past public, site-specific works you’ve done, whether at Madison Square Park or [for the Seattle Public Library](#).

Tony Oursler: The installation in Seattle specifically had to do with the library, and the concept of a chain of information, or the transmission of it. My first Public Art Fund project in the park, called [“The Influence Machine,”](#) had a long run up to it in which I got into researching what I thought of as a shadow history of modern technology and telecommunication. I was really fascinated by how a lot of inventions like the telegraph or photography became codified industrially, commercially. Before they did, they were adapted by people for all sorts of interesting things, such as [spirit photography](#). I wanted to think of this new work as a companion piece to that one, but also for it to have its own world. The Hudson Valley became a main source of inspiration this time around, but the focus is still on communications technologies up through the development of the internet to what it has become now, as well as artificial intelligence. The Hudson Valley is the through line, it was really the first Silicon Valley given that [the punch card was developed there](#) by Herman Hollerith and [IBM started there](#) as well.

GARAGE: Don’t forget women on the [Jacquard looms](#), early [progenitors of the world wide web](#)!

TO: Exactly. And I follow that into the development of the [transistor](#) at AT&T’s Bell Labs, just across the river in New Jersey. There are millions of those in one iPhone, just making a gate through which electricity can flow. The transistor is the foundation of our era, and the very first one that was created is beautiful, it looks like a sculpture to me. But in the middle of all that in “Tear of the Cloud,” there’s also an excursion through the morse code, invented by [Samuel F. B. Morse](#), who was also a painter. The precedent for the morse code was [the talking drum](#), a West African instrument that can produce tones and rhythms that mimic the human voice. It’s a method of communication that people can understand over pretty vast distances, even up to five miles, depending on the weather. Prior to the invention of the telegraph, it was a much faster and more accurate technology than anything in the West. The instrument came here with slavery, and then was banned shortly after slave rebellions, or only allowed to be played once a year. While there’s probably no evidence so far, my feeling is that Morse must have at least known about it, and it might have informed some of his thinking when he developed the morse code. He slave rebellions, or only allowed to be played once a year. While there’s probably no evidence so far, my feeling is that Morse must have at least known about it, and it might have informed some of his thinking when he developed the morse code. He was also a serious artist who jettisoned his activities in that realm in favor of inventing.

One of the things I stumbled upon in my research was this one painting of his called [“Susan Walker Morse \(The Muse\),”](#) depicting his daughter, which is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was actually his last painting, done around 1836-37 while he was working on inventing the telegraph, and he made his first model of a telegraph on a stretcher bar in his studio. The first version had a piece of paper that was kind of spooled through it, and electrical impulses made the pencil mark the paper, which later became replaced by just a sound. The composition she’s working on in the painting, a pencil posed over a tabula rasa, is

the same as that of the actual telegraph, which was pretty shocking to me. It's sort of like she's replacing him, and there's a reenactment of this painting in my video. A lot of artists in those days it seems like had the idea to invent something, which would make them money and then that would allow them to just paint.

GARAGE: I'm sure many artists are still looking for that!

TO: The inventor of the steamboat, [Robert Fulton](#), was a similar case. But anyway, Susan Walker Morse becomes a protagonist in my video, and the clean slate she's holding in the painting is animated into a sort of bird, and a peace symbol to references the hippie culture and Woodstock in upstate New York. That evolves into her as an inventor of video games—she plays "[Pong](#)" and then moves through "[Space Invaders](#)" and "[Tank Commander](#)." It's not a linear narrative, but the connections in terms of history and technology are there.



Photograph courtesy of the Public Art Fund.

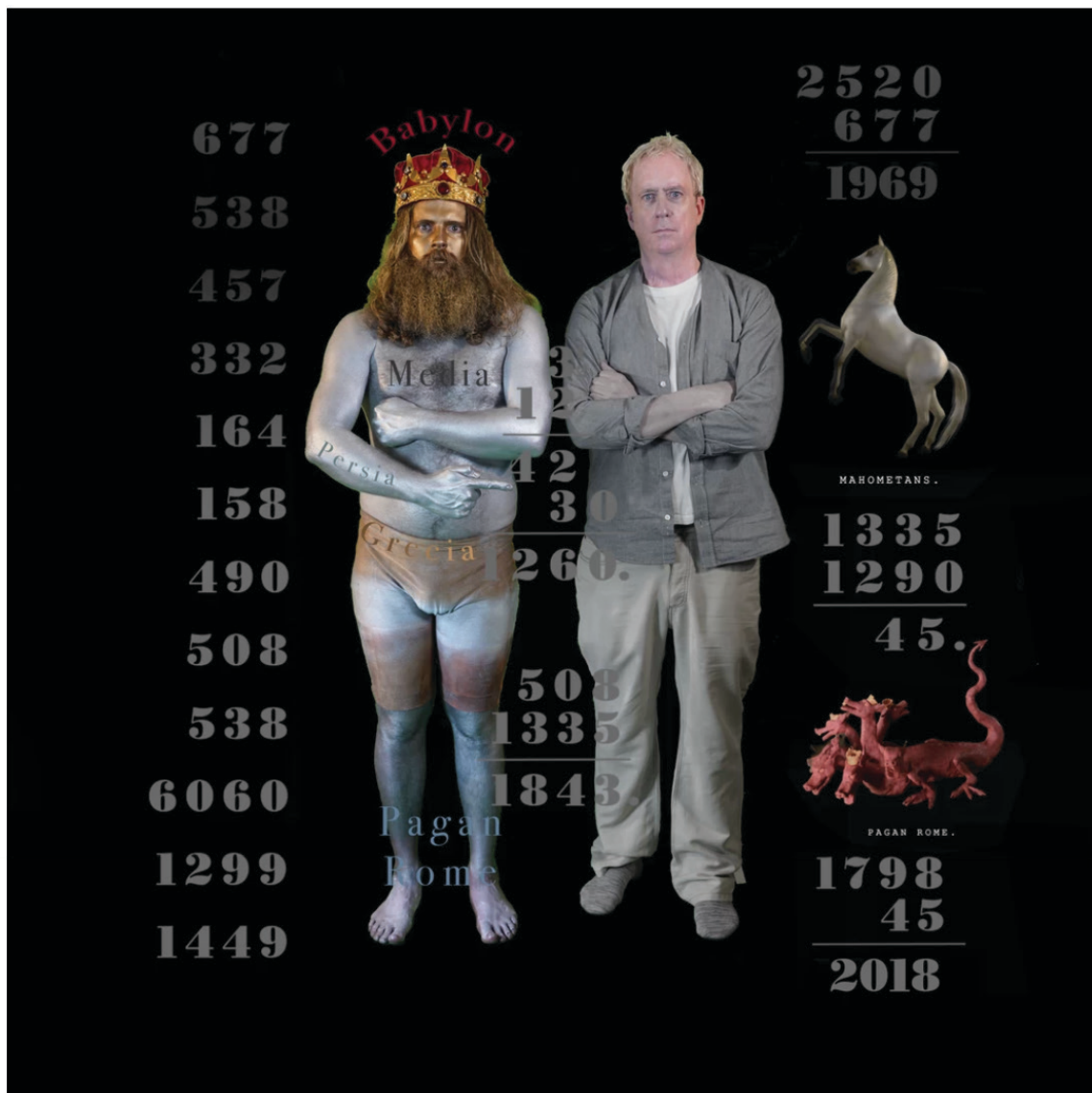
GARAGE: Your videos usually make very specific things, like a person's face or voice, [into an abstract collage](#) or [disjointed dialogue](#), so that it becomes somewhat anonymous. The references you're bringing into this video are so specific though, dealing with particular histories and real figures.

TO: Yes. For instance, in the video I have [Grandmaster Flash](#) turning into [Joseph Cornell](#), and the drone musician [MV Carbon](#) announcing, "I'm Jimi Hendrix." Grandmaster Flash also appears in the work as a symbol I made up of a guy who falls, gets up, and jumps back up, but the loop of that movement is actually encoded onto bacteria taken from the Hudson River. I asked the scientist who [set into DNA](#) the movement of [Eadweard Muybridge's famous horse pictures](#) to do it.

GARAGE: So some historical material is being presented straight, and some introduced just to transform or evolve into something else. A lot of figures you're bringing into the work are outliers too, or renegades.

TO: Yes. There's an oracle quality to new technology, you know? As soon as the telegraph was invented, spiritualists took it up as a kind of [metaphor for their own interest in other realms](#). There's a connection between the visionary claims of

[interest in other realms](#). There's a connection between the visionary claims of spiritualists and technologists too. Another thread in this work is my research on a group in upstate New York called the New American Spiritualist Movement, out of which came [Kate Fox and her sisters](#). It made a lot of sense that they would become mediums, because that way they could bypass the patriarchal system of religion. The [murder case of Mary Rogers](#) weaves through "Tear of the Cloud" too. She was a young woman working in a cigar shop in New York in the nineteenth century, and her body was found at the entrance of Sybil's Cave in New Jersey. People were outraged over her death, and Edgar Allan Poe wrote about her in what would be one of the first detective stories, "[The Mystery of Marie Rogêt](#)." He shopped the tale around to editors by claiming that he had solved the mystery surrounding her death in his story. His fiction introduces forensic techniques though, which are then picked up by Sherlock Holmes and police departments due to the way that he assembles information on the case through newspaper articles and obsessive deduction. You can take this example of Poe and Mary Rogers, and extend the speculation and intelligence gathering around the story to today, with big data constantly collecting information on us. Forensics is all about taking minor facts, and putting them together to create a profile, or a larger picture that could become a truism. Tech companies have expanded that.



Photograph courtesy of the Public Art Fund.

GARAGE: In the work then, history and current news or issues are all happening at the same time then. Temporal distinctions collapse in terms of the narrative. And so the piece will be projected onto the Hudson River?

TO: Yes, along the gantry, and then there's a projection down into the water. Altogether the video hits five spots around the structure on the river.

GARAGE: Compiling all this information and these histories together, but then displaying them as multiple, simultaneous projections feels like it would be similar to what looking at the internet is like, in which you're often trying to make sense of or deal with several inboxes, streams, or feeds at once, and then attempting to synthesize from there.

TO: Exactly, except that I'm also trying to be a little nicer to the audience!

["Tear of the Cloud"](#) opens on October 10 in partnership with Public Art Fund and can be seen at Riverside Park South, Pier 1, between 68 and 70th Streets through October 31, 2018.

GARAGE

Artnews

18 September 2018

ARTNEWS

NEWS

Tony Oursler to Conjure Public Art in New York's Riverside Park This Fall

BY *Andy Battaglia* POSTED 09/18/18 10:38 AM

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Tony Oursler, *Tear of the Cloud*, 2018.

TONY OURSLER STUDIO/COURTESY THE ARTIST

Tony Oursler, the ensorcelling New York-based artist whose work often wanders into matters of magic and the occult, will present a Public Art Fund project titled *Tear of the Cloud* on and around the Hudson River for three weeks in October. The multimedia work features video to be projected on the West 69th Street Transfer Bridge as well as the waters and landscapes surrounding it in Riverside Park in Manhattan.

In a statement, Oursler compared the visual and auditory aspects of the work—featuring videos made in reference to local lore and an accompanying soundtrack—to “the mnemonic effect of the river and the many intertwined tropes associated with the Hudson Valley region.” A list of allusions for scenes and set pieces in the work includes “the Hudson River School (the country’s first regional artistic movement which gave birth to the initial land preservation movement), social media bots, inventor Samuel Morse’s final painting, *The Muse*, The Headless Horseman, IBM’s chess-playing computer Deep Blue, Mary Rogers’s infamous murder at Sibyl’s Cave in New Jersey, the 19th-century utopian society of Oneida, experimental music developed in the South Bronx and Lower Manhattan,” and more.

Some of the referents will blur together. To wit, from Oursler: “The Headless Horseman and his horse are important references in *Tear of the Cloud*, as they gallop towards artificial intelligence, the chess-playing computer Deep Blue’s famous knight sacrifice, facial recognition technologies, and bots which have provoked significant questions about our future.” Others will look into history, as per an allusion to Pearl White’s 1910s-era silent films created in the Palisades and the development of the first transistor nearby at IBM’s Bell Labs.

Tear of the Cloud will be viewable nightly from 7 to 10 p.m. during its run next month, from October 10 to 31. One of those nights, one might notice, is Halloween.

LISSON GALLERY

The Brooklyn Rail
4 September 2018



Tony Oursler: *TC: the most interesting man alive*

by Ida Pruitt

LISSON GALLERY, JUNE 29 - AUGUST 10



Tony Oursler, *TC: The most interesting man alive*. In collaboration with Tony Conrad. © Tony Oursler. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Tony Oursler's film *TC: the most interesting man alive* (2016 – 2018), made with avant-garde polymath and long-time collaborator Tony Conrad (1940 – 2016), portrays Conrad as an interview subject in Oursler's studio. Known for working beyond the established boundaries of their respective mediums, Oursler and Conrad rejected a conventional interview structure in which the subject is demystified through the divulgence of information, and instead produced an alchemical potion of untrustworthy narration, humor, music, and theatrics. The lo-fi synthesis of these elements showcases a departure by Oursler from his current high-production video practice to a more performative, experimental approach that's fitting with Conrad's legacy as a pioneer of structural film and drone music. The provisional sensibility of the film evokes the scene in which the two artists met—CalArts in the late '70s—and with nothing more than a studio, a green screen, and some props, Oursler and Conrad author a curious blend of biopic and candid improvisation.

The film loosely follows the timeline of Conrad's life, from birth to his post-college years. We see Conrad, along with friends and colleagues such as Paige Sarlin, Peggy Ahwesh, Constance Dejong, Joe Gibbons, Marie Losier, and Jennifer Walsh, act out and recite his memories in front of a green screen that Oursler fills with supplemental imagery both literal and associative. A forest floor floats beneath Conrad when he stumbles upon a fossil as a child, while his birth scene finds him in a pink bodysuit, hurtling down a tunnel of 3D-animated red blood cells. In a later scene, Paige Sarlin speaks from the perspective of Conrad's mother, relating a story about a gift he gave his two-year-old brother Peter (a sack of stones from the driveway). His brother, she tells us, exclaimed, "Oh, Tony, thank you, they're gnomes—gnomes!" The family subsequently adopted Peter's linguistic glitch into their vocabulary, switching out "stones" for "gnomes." This game of make-believe—sustained by the delight in reliving fond memories—sets the theme for the film. Conrad spins his autobiography while never letting us forget the susceptibility of memory to fabulation.

“Might be true, might be true, might not be true” Conrad says about a memory of how he learned to light matches. He then puzzles over whether or not he “burned” his brother as a montage of men burning alive plays overlaid atop his face. An event that was in all likelihood a household accident with matches is replaced by a dramatic alternative akin to a horror movie spectacle.



Tony Oursler, *TC: The most interesting man alive*. In collaboration with Tony Conrad. © Tony Oursler. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Conrad’s playfulness with the ambiguity of language also makes its way into his experiments with sound, which occur periodically throughout the film. A designer of bizarre, makeshift instruments, he uses a bow to “play” a hole in a piece of canvas stretched over a rectangular frame as he would the violin. Later, he performs with a bow and ukulele in a colorfully illuminated cave in a sequence reminiscent of late ’60s psychedelic film techniques. The sound mutates slowly, as if Conrad is playing back the echoes he hears reflecting off the cave walls, and then transitions into the beginning of his and Faust’s seminally minimal album *Outside the Dream Syndicate* (1973).

After Conrad tells us that his parents convinced him to spend his paperboy money on a violin, he describes learning to play one: “I would just play one note or so, because I gave up. I didn’t even want to try to make the pretty songs happen.” His impatience with virtuosity makes a second appearance when we see him use a roll of 16mm film to recount an abbreviated history of his struggles with the medium. “The only trouble with working on film is that there’s so many frames,” Conrad grumbles while preparing for the labor-intensive process of frame-by-frame animation. Scribbling on a section of the 16mm roll at a small school desk, Conrad mutters about tedium before acting out a eureka moment in which he realizes he can deal with the material directly by pickling it in a jar, one of his many destructive techniques that included the burning, washing, and cooking of film. Conrad had a countercultural approach to music and filmmaking that was rooted in an ingenious evasion of labor. His monophonic violin experiments as a child novice prefigured his pioneering of drone music in the ’60s, and his rejection of traditional filmmaking yielded such works of structural film as *The Flicker* (1966), which utilized only five unique frames to produce a strobing effect.

Oursler expertly balances Conrad's different modes, from captivating storyteller to focused performer. His treatment of the interview footage, while heavy with visual effects, is decidedly light in that it has room to capture something fundamental about Conrad's personality and work without ever being explicit about that as a goal—and never aggrandizing. Conrad is at ease in front of the camera in a way that makes everything he says and does feel natural, even when he's playing with the truth or exhibiting eccentricities. He has an enviable ability to seem at once effortless and completely singular, and his art is no different. In *TC: the most interesting man alive*, Oursler expresses the spirit of Tony Conrad with an originality matched only by its subject.



TONY OURSLER
Museum of Modern Art,
New York, and Center
for Curatorial Studies,
Annandale-on-Hudson,
USA

Black Mirror and *Stranger Things* were two of the most popular Netflix series this past, dreadful year. Each episode of *Black Mirror* tells a cautionary tale of how near future developments in virtual reality and social media might destabilize our sense of self. *Stranger Things* rolls supernatural chiller into conspiracy thriller, garnished with nostalgia for movies such as *E.T.* (1982) and *The Goonies* (1985). Both shows play to our bleakest fears about the power of technology, ascribing to it a malevolent consciousness.

You could say that Tony Oursler's 'imponderable' makes a good historical reader for these shows. A film and exhibition exploring the artist's vast collection of images and ephemera relating to illusionism, the occult, photography and unexplained phenomena, 'Imponderable' is an engrossing voyage through the interzone between science and spiritualism. It also demonstrates the ways in which human imagination has reacted to periods of change and used technology as a means to re-enchant the world. Much of the material in the collection dates from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, periods of rapid development in photography, transportation and telegraphy. Spirit photography, clairvoyance and seances were expressions of wonder and anxiety in response to the increasing speed and shape-shifting of communication and representation, and – with the arrival of industrial-scale warfare in 1914 – a therapy to handle grief.

The Center for Curatorial Studies (CCS) exhibition held the bulk of Oursler's archive, presented across a maze of vitrines, loosely grouped according to theme (automatic writing, for instance, or Satan worship) or type (images of ectoplasm or Kirlian photography). Here, you could find images of hypnotism experiments and

journals of psychic research featuring articles on 'electronic exorcism', ESP test cards, palmistry diagrams, a set of Tarot designed by Aleister Crowley and Lady Frieda Harris, and images of UFO sightings. Categories and subjects were not limited to the paranormal; there were also news clippings about the Jonestown massacre, publicity photos of occultist Anton LaVey and pamphlets relating to radical US political cell the Weather Underground. All, in a sense, forms of cultural marginalia – beliefs, spectacles and speculations from society's fringes that have held a strong grip on the imagination; expressions of a desire for mystery; for the innocence of things unknown; for the pleasures of looking at the world out of the corner of one's eye.

At MoMA, Oursler focused on the fascinating life of his grandfather, Fulton Oursler, an editor at *True Detective* and *True Romance* magazines, screenwriter and debunker of fraudulent spirit mediums. A room featuring vintage posters for stage illusionists, explanations of Pepper's ghost (a theatre trick using glass screens and projected lights, designed to make a ghost 'appear' on stage), Victorian fairy photographs and papers from the Oursler family archives, functioned as a cinema foyer of sorts, leading to a specially designed auditorium screening his film *Imponderable* (which also makes ingenious use of Pepper's ghost to overlay images). The film is divided into episodes, each one telling a historical story connected to the life of the artist's grandfather. Delightfully wooden acting and lo-fi effects give *Imponderable* a kitsch atmosphere. It's a subtle favour that seems, to my mind, as much influenced by watching reruns of *The Addams Family* and *The Invaders*, listening to The Cramps (who adopted the schlock aesthetics of 1950s horror movies), or reading issues of *The Fortean Times*, as it is by an interest in the subjects themselves. *Imponderable* is an expression of affection for the overlooked or marginalized aspects of US culture or, rather, its manifold and splintered subcultures of belief and spectacle.

Dan Fox



Confront the Paranormal in '5-D' at MoMA

BY JENNIFER KRASINSKI

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2016 AT 11:45 A.M.



Oursler debunks his own artwork in front of our very eyes.

Jonathan Muzikar/The Museum of Modern Art, New York

"I've always been interested in thought systems, occult, magical thinking," Tony Oursler said in an interview with artist-photographer Sarah Trigg for her book *Studio Life: Rituals, Collections, Tools, and Observations on the Artistic Process*. "How do certain people go from having a straight job to all of a sudden believing they're going to fly on a comet tail, like the members of the Hale-Bopp cult? How does that happen? And somehow it's connected to art — this belief in a system of transcendence."

In Oursler's latest installation, the feature-length video *Imponderable*, the artist takes on the subjects of art and magical thinking, weaving a story out of threads pulled from his own family history. The artist's grandfather was the writer Fulton Oursler, who worked with magician and escape artist Harry Houdini in the Twenties to debunk spirit mediums – those who claimed they could speak to the dead – as charlatans. The plot thickens with the appearance of characters including his grandmother, the screenwriter Grace Perkins; author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; infamous spirit medium Mina "Margery" Crandon; and more. Over the course of ninety minutes, we watch Fulton and Houdini each take on popular pseudosciences – spirit photography and telekinesis among them – as Doyle and Crandon stump for the existence of supernatural realities that defy rational thought. Exhibited alongside selections from the artist's formidable collection of dark-arts ephemera (including a letter from Doyle to Fulton Oursler; photographs of the author surrounded by an ectoplasm; the robe Crandon wore when holding séances; and an early-twentieth-century "spirit horn," used to amplify voices of visiting souls), the video in essence pits believers and doubters against one another to see which side wins out – which side, one might say, *transcends*.

Imponderable is presented in "5-D," a delightfully clever combination of screen projection with what Holmes might call more elementary illusions: a Pepper's Ghost-inspired rig by which additional images are layered onto glass in front of the screen, and IRL theatrical tricks that playfully dissolve the lines between Oursler's projected world and our own. (During the screening, fans occasionally turn on, blasting cool breezes into the theater; an overhead black light causes audience members to glow during a séance sequence; a loud banging shakes the seats as spirits rise onscreen.)

The push-pull between belief and doubt is also embedded in the uncool-cool art-world DIY style of the video itself, which is deliberately goofball and flat-footed, putting all its seams on view. Artifice is the real star of the show. The sets are built, or half-built, so that we sometimes catch glimpses of the world "offstage"; other scenes play out before backdrops constructed of composited images. The special effects (such as they are) are loose-handed and awkward, and the actors – some accomplished, some novices – all adopt a semi-self-conscious performance style (some even recite their lines from offscreen cue cards). In other words, all is to be seen, but not to be believed.

UPCOMING EVENTS

asticks

3, 8:00pm

TICKETS

Crime

3, 8:00pm

TICKETS

(NY)

3, 8:00pm

TICKETS

ing Rotten! (NY)

3, 8:00pm

TICKETS

Which is too bad. For all the impish delight Oursler takes in devising his video and its installation – and for the staggering breadth and depth of his knowledge regarding his subjects – he ultimately debunks his own artwork right before our very eyes. Why? In part, perhaps, because he wishes to remind us of the simple facts of fiction. Or, as Fulton Oursler loudly declares in the video: "This image is a complete impostor!" But we in the 21st century are well aware that images are impostors, as are magicians and artists – and that this is part of their

value, their presence. All dupe the eye into seeing things that aren't there, boring portals in the real world for us to slip through to other dimensions, if only momentarily. Belief in an elsewhere is a strange thing, of course, slip-sliding between balm and delusion. What would it mean if *Imponderable* had suspended its audience in a transcendent moment between pure reason and a grand illusion, rather than settle in the safe space of artful knowingness? In the end, belief is a much more mysterious, more alluring experience. I myself would have preferred to see more magic, and fewer tricks of the trade.

Tony Oursler: *Imponderable*

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53rd Street

212-708-9431, moma.org

Through January 8

LISSON GALLERY

The New York Times
30 June 2016

The New York Times

Tony Oursler's Grand Illusions, Science Left at the Door

By KEN JOHNSON JUNE 30, 2016



A Tibetan kapala skull from the 19th century that would have been used in both Hindu and Buddhist tantra rituals, at the exhibition "Tony Oursler: The Imponderable Archive" at the Hessel Museum of Art at the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies. Byron Smith for The New York Times

In Paris in the early 1780s, [Franz Anton Mesmer](#) was attracting attention for his showy demonstrations of "mesmerism," or what would later be called hypnotism. King Louis XVI appointed a commission that included Benjamin Franklin, America's ambassador to France, to investigate.

The commissioners' report debunked Mesmer's theory of "animal magnetism" and proffered comments — widely attributed to Franklin — on the attractions of erroneous beliefs. "Truth," averred the writer, "is uniform and narrow," but in the field of error, "the soul has room enough to expand herself, to display all her boundless faculties and all her beautiful and interesting extravagancies."



A scrying ball used by magicians and archival photographs featuring the magician Wilfred Sellten, left, and Harry Houdini. Byron Smith for The New York Times

The observation is aptly quoted in the doorstop of a catalog for [“Tony Oursler: The Imponderable Archive,”](#) a fascinating and amusing exhibition at the Hessel Museum of Art at the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies.

The exhibition consists of 680 items from a collection of more than 2,500 artifacts dating back to the 18th century having to do with scientifically unsupportable beliefs. Compiled by the artist [Tony Oursler](#), it includes photographs, paintings, drawings, manuscripts, books, pamphlets and mechanical devices. There are publications and objects items pertaining to Satan worshipers, flat-earthers, witches, magicians, alchemists, mesmerizers, Theosophists, spirit photographers and other imaginative and often fraudulent cosmologists, lunder glass on 35 tables.



A 1920s German poster advertising stage magic, publicity photos for magicians (1910-1970s), and magician letterheads from the late 19th-early 20th century, are among the archival displays on the show.

Byron Smith for The New York Times

Mr. Oursler's archive naturally brings to mind the [collections of Jim Shaw that were exhibited at the New Museum](#) last year. But whereas Mr. Shaw looks to amateur paintings and kitschy religious artifacts with the eye of a connoisseur, Mr. Oursler is less discriminating about visual or poetic qualities. His archive feels driven more by a philosophical preoccupation with relations between illusion and reality. The overall effect is like that of a giant Surrealistic collage, a crazy quilt of superstition, paranoia, perversity and idiocy. It's great fun to peruse.

One table displays photographs and ephemera pertaining to the career of a man named Charles Fulton Oursler (1893-1952), who was Tony Oursler's grandfather. An amateur magician and successful editor, author and Hollywood screenplay writer, [Fulton Oursler](#), as he was known, was a prominent debunker of the spiritualist-séance fad that arose in the 1920s. In the 1940s, after recovery from alcoholism thanks to Alcoholics Anonymous, he became a deeply religious Roman Catholic and wrote ["The Greatest Story Every Told,"](#) a best-selling life of Jesus.



"Le Volcan," a video installation by Tony Oursler. Byron Smith for The New York Times

Fulton Oursler's son — Tony's father — Charles Fulton Oursler II, carried on the family legacy. He began as an editor at Reader's Digest and then became editor in chief of the Christian magazine Guideposts. In that capacity, he founded a spinoff called [Angels on Earth](#), which presents stories about intervention in human affairs by divine beings. Issues of the magazine are included in the exhibition.



Sequined baby voodoo doll from late 20th century. Byron Smith for The New York Times

Tony, whose full name is Charles Fulton Oursler III, seems to have kept up the family business. In the 1990s, he became known for [sculptures](#) involving comically distorted faces and bodies of people projected onto stuffed dummies. Quietly mumbling and complaining, these figures were magically lifelike. At the same time, an obvious artifice created tension between the illusory and the real. The sculptures debunked themselves.

Unlike those of his religiously observant predecessors, Mr. Oursler's beliefs are hard to pin down. As an archivist, he acts like an anthropologist presenting his discoveries without evaluative comment. Different tables are devoted to topics like Scientology, U.F.O.s, mind-altering drugs and thought photographs supposedly made by projecting mental ideas or images onto film.

The archive abounds in amusing surprises. On one table is a set of delightful colored-pencil cartoon drawings made by the director Federico Fellini from 1960 to 1990, including caricatures of Laurel and Hardy and a picture of a tiger in a room with similar pictures of tigers hanging on the walls. It's eminently appropriate that the exhibition is presented on a college campus, as it should serve as an excellent study collection for students from a variety of disciplines including psychology, philosophy and art history.

theguardian

Art and design

Could it be magick? The occult returns to the art world

Genesis Breyer P-Orridge and Tony Oursler have spent many years exploring paranormal phenomena through their artworks. Now, both have major exhibitions in New York - and suddenly they're not alone in their interests

Andy Battaglia

Friday 1 July 2016 10.00 BST



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Genesis Breyer P-Orridge: a pandrogenous devotee of sex magick. Photograph: Peter Dibdin/Publicity image

Drugs, blood, caskets, fish and hair all feature in the arsenal of supplies enlisted for art by [Genesis Breyer P-Orridge](#). A few more, for variety's sake: bones, a brass hand, dominatrix shoes and the discarded skin of a pet boa constrictor.

Best known as a musical dissident with the proto-industrial band [Throbbing Gristle](#) and later [Psychic TV](#), Breyer P-Orridge has made visual art for decades as part of a ritualistic practice in which boundaries tend to blur. The first transmissions of musical noise started in the 1970s, but art has been part of the project from several years before then to the present day. Work of the more recent vintage makes up the bulk of [Genesis Breyer P-Orridge: Try to Altar Everything](#), an exhibition on view at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York.

The Rubin show focuses on correspondences between global contemporaneity and historic cultures from areas around the Himalayas and India, and the show surveys, in an expansive fashion, Breyer P-Orridge's engagement with ideas from Hindu mythology and Nepal. Nepal is a favored haven away from the artist's home in New York, but - as with most matters in Breyer P-Orridge's realm - worldly matters turn otherworldly fast.



Reliquary by Genesis Breyer P-Orridge. Photograph: Invisible Exports



Visitors to the exhibition are greeted by two large illuminated portraits of nude bodies on the surface of caskets standing on end, one belonging to the artist and the other to h/er late partner and muse [Lady Jaye Breyer P-Orridge](#). The unorthodox pronoun “h/er” is not a mistake but the preferred way to address the genderless existence of the pandrogyn, a state of male-female fusion the two were seeking to achieve by way of surgical incursions and rituals to combine souls. The undertaking was chronicled intimately in the 2011 documentary [The Ballad of Genesis and Lady Jaye](#), released to wide acclaim four years after Lady Jaye fell prey to cancer and died (or “left her body,” as Genesis tells it). Now, Try to Altar Everything brings some of the couple’s collaborative artwork into the light.

Blood Bunny, made over 10 years until its completion in 2007, is a sculpture under glass of a wooden rabbit covered in blood. Hanging from its head is a ponytail made from Lady Jaye’s hair, bright blond in contrast to the dark blood all but black in its desiccated state. The source of it was needle pricks from injections of the powerful drug ketamine, which the couple took - and Breyer P-Orridge reveres still - for its fabled out-of-body experiences.

“It’s such a powerful material that we don’t waste it - we use it. We’ve got little vials of blood in our refrigerator at home,” Breyer P-Orridge says while staring the bunny down at the museum on a recent sunny afternoon.



📷 Blood Bunny: includes blood infused with ketamine. Photograph: Invisible Exports



Nearby are a small sculptural shrine with dried fish slathered in sparkles over an abstract mandala design (*Feeding the Fishes*, 2010) and an odd clock remade with fossil teeth, feathers and bits of gold alluding to alchemical forces (*It's All a Matter of Time*, 2016).

Works of the sort in the show serve as reliquaries or tools for use in rituals rooted in a mixture of familiar religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, voodoo) and inclinations toward the more arcane realms of black magic and the occult.

“We’ve investigated lots of avenues and that includes occulture of various types,” says Breyer P-Orridge, who uses the word “we” exclusively in reference to a sort of individual and collective self. Early learning from occult figures like [Aleister Crowley](#) and mysterious magical sects like the [Ordo Templi Orientis](#) led to a lifelong devotion to ritualistic practice that has expanded and evolved.

S/he speaks highly still of “sex magic, where the orgasm is the moment when all forms of consciousness in your mind are joined, temporarily, and therefore you can pass a message through.” And other ceremonial endeavors involving age-old symbols and codes continue to be part of a method of art-making that is as much about the making as the end result.



Feeding the Fishes: a small sculptural shrine. Photograph: Invisible Exports



An essay in the catalog for the Rubin show refers to Breyer P-Orridge's earliest work's dedication to "the 'discovery of intention', meaning it created and unearthed its message and relevance through performance, not before," while characterizing h/er ritual-abetted communion with Lady Jaye as a "living, experimental work of art in the process".

The exhibition, which continues through 1 August, arrives in the midst of a certain vogue for art attuned to occult practices. Last fall, a survey of demonic and deranged paintings by [Marjorie Cameron](#), an associate of notorious rocket-scientist/occultist [Jack Parsons](#) and film-maker [Kenneth Anger](#), showed at the gallery of prominent New York art maven Jeffrey Deitch. A group show titled [Language of the Birds: Occult and Art](#) gathered work by the likes of [Brion Gysin](#), [Jordan Belson](#), [Anohni](#), [Lionel Ziprin](#), [Carol Bove](#) and many more (including Breyer P-Orridge) in the 80WSE Gallery at New York University. Uptown at the American Folk Art Museum, a show titled [Mystery and Benevolence: Masonic and Odd Fellows Folk Art](#) drew visitors before closing in May.

Enough interest has been fostered and fanned out to make one wonder about the source of it all. Is it a yearning for art made for purposes other than mere aesthetic enterprise? A desired deferral to forces other than those proffered by markets and asset-class finance deals? A curiosity about creations devised with a mind for matters at play outside internal dialogues within just the art world itself?



A still from Tony Oursler's *Imponderable*. Photograph: MoMA



[Tony Oursler](#), who has [a new exhibition with paranormal proclivities on view at the Museum of Modern Art](#), says he can see the appeal of looking beyond the artistic pursuit for other forms of reason and rationale.

“A lot of people are trying to move into more social practices to find some relevance. It’s probably refreshing for people to see a certain kind of agency that can be offered in other practices,” the artist says.

Oursler’s show is more playful and inclined toward levity and debunking than Breyer P-Orridge’s. It includes parts of an immense archival collection related to stage magic and historical matters such as spirit photography and telekinetic mediums popular in the early 20th century, when notions of ghosts and transmissions from other worlds were very much part of the cultural conversation. The archive and a fanciful feature-length film, [Imponderable](#), chart a peculiar history involving Oursler’s own grandfather Charles Fulton Oursler and his real-life dealings with characters including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Houdini and various spirit-world fixtures who turned out to be hucksters and frauds.

About the magnetism of such a subject, Oursler speaks of an “unending interest in magical thinking and how it’s generated through media and various social means that led me back to these world views.”



📷 Bolts from the blue: art gets spooky. Photograph: MoMA



He insists, too, that they are not as anachronistic as many might suspect. “Everyone walks around with a matrix of beliefs through which they view the world,” Oursler says. “Statistically, if you look at America, it turns out roughly [60% of the population believes in ESP](#). One in three people do not believe in evolution. Forty percent of the public believes in UFOs. The rationalism we assume to be there might not, in fact, be there.”

Breyer P-Orridge attributes rising interest in the occult to certain fleeting motivations. “Some of it is pure fashion, always,” s/he says. But the role of ritual and faith in its own ends can be a guide. After growing weary of the hierarchies and conscriptions of ceremonial magic as practiced early on (see: robes, chants, gestures with strict limitations and rules), “We thought: Do you need all the fancy theatrics or is there something at the core that makes things happen? Our experience tells us it’s just one or two things at the core. One of those is being able to reprogram one’s deep consciousness through repetition in ritual.”

When a working sense of ritual conjoins with the process of making art, the result might be differently invested. “When we walk around to galleries, we’re nearly always disappointed,” Breyer P-Orridge says of art s/he sees around town. “Most of it is not about anything. It’s decorative at best and looks nice in penthouses. And now it’s gotten more corrupted because it’s like the stock market - people going around to advise people what to buy as an investment. You can’t trust the art world.”

To be trusted instead: “That strange reverberation that tells me what’s fascinating.”

Accompanying the archive in the museum galleries are two of Mr. Oursler's recent video installations. Each video is projected inside a large, black box with a wide window allowing viewers to watch from outside. "Le Volcan" involves staged comical scenes with people in fanciful costumes acting out magic ceremonies and séances. In "My Saturnian Lover(s)," a woman and a boy eagerly await the U.F.O. she believes is coming to take them away. In both presentations, a strange three-dimensional quality is created apparently by double exposure. Looking inside the box you see that this is accomplished by rear-projecting one video onto a screen and projecting another onto a mirror on the floor in front of the screen, which in turn projects the imagery onto the screen.

At the Museum of Modern Art, a similar but much larger projection system has been built for Mr. Oursler's 90-minute film, "[Imponderable](#)," in which episodes from the history of spiritualist frauds and hoaxes are re-enacted while mystic flames, smoke and ectoplasmic phenomena come and go. At certain moments during the film's progress, you feel breezes wafting over you and hear loud thumping under the theater's risers.

The crudeness of these effects is part of the generally comical spirit. But Mr. Oursler is making a larger point about the confusion between illusion and reality to which human beings seem to be congenitally susceptible. As Franklin's group pointed out long ago, truth is often hard and boringly consistent. For most people, fantasies and myths are more compelling and easier to comprehend, especially if they are conveyed by charismatic charlatans and demagogues using deceptive technologies.

Unlike his father and grandfather, Mr. Oursler is not a crusader for any particular belief system. He's a secularist skeptic who entertainingly urges a circumspect view of any and all simple solutions to the mysteries of the universe. In these epistemologically perplexing times, that's a valuable service.

"Tony Oursler: The Imponderable Archive" runs through Oct. 30 at Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College Center for Curatorial Studies, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.; 845-758-7598, bard.edu/ccs. "Tony Oursler: Imponderable" continues through Jan. 8 at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; 212-708-9400, moma.org.

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Multimedia Artist Tony Oursler Documents Personal Archive in 'Imponderable' Exhibit and Book



Adam Lehrer
CONTRIBUTOR

I write about New York's art gallery system and museum structure.

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Legendary multimedia artist Tony Oursler has long explored the ways in which the human body is affected by technology. Through works spanning video, collage, sculpture, installation, performance, and painting, Oursler tries to understand the myriad manners in which the mind is seduced by the image as projected by television, technology, violence, media, and mental illness and conceptually draws a thread between these seducers.



'Imponderable' exhibition, all installation photos by Stefan Altenburger

In 2000, Oursler presented the major outdoor project 'Influence Machine.' That installation arguably marked a new period in Oursler's conceptual approach. Oursler used objects from nature as projection screens to explore how communicative technology, from the telegraph to the computer, have been used to commute to the dead. He is interested in the connection between the occult and technology in that people who use tech for mystical purposes are inherently in opposition to corporate culture's primary intention for technology: selling. "While the corporation wants you to consume, some people just want to use corporate technology to become mystical or make art," says Oursler. "I think it's really important to interrogate technologies and think about creative, positive, and alternative uses for them. That's part of my mission."



'Imponderable' exhibition

'Imponderable' is the title of Oursler's [current exhibition at LUMA Westbau](#) in Zurich. Curated by Beatrix Ruf and Tom Eccles of the LUMA Foundation. Partly inspired by an interaction between Oursler's grandfather, the acclaimed 1920s and 1930s mystery and detective fiction writer Fulton Oursler, and Arthur Conan Doyle that saw the two men debate spiritualism through photographs, the exhibition documents Oursler's personal collection of 2,500 photographs, publications, and objects that track a "social, spiritual, and intellectual history dating back to the 18th Century." "Imponderable" suggests an idea that cannot be properly explained through science, and indeed this archive explores the research of mystical uses of technology forming a timeline that would eventually lead to 'Influence Machine.' In this show, Oursler aptly displays the occult uses of communicative technology before said technology becomes commodified by corporation. It all seems to suggest that technology is not a problem in and of itself. In fact, if used interestingly it can be a gift. Like anything else, it's the commodification of tech where things become murky.



'Imponderable' Exhibition

The exhibition presents Oursler's new film shot in 4D with theatrical special effects as well as lectures by Columbia art history professor Noam Elcott, Oursler himself, and more. But with these massive undertakings, Oursler and LUMA were not yet satisfied.

Accompanying the exhibition is a gargantuan 655-page book, *Imponderable: The Archives of Tony Oursler*, designed by esteemed graphic artist [Zak Kyes](#) and produced in collaboration with JRP/Ringier. The book documents the same collection as seen in the exhibit. It is a gift, because the exhibition and the material at large is a lengthy commitment. Oursler's work can not be simply be gawked at. It has to really be examined to fully admire.

This whole onslaught of material might seem daunting to dive into, I'm sure. But Oursler's exceedingly heady work can be extremely rewarding to spend some time with. Despite its examination of technology, it allows the spectator to take a reprieve from and examine technology as an idea. Oursler's influence is stamped over a slew of contemporary art. If you caught the [New Museum's Triennial](#) this year, it's clear that re-thinking the human body and tech is a popular mode in art right now. But Oursler has been thinking about these ideas for decades. To break down this high-concept material, Oursler answered some questions I had over E-mail.



Photograph of Dr. R. L. Noran, an ESP practitioner, with half-dollar coins taped over his eyes to prohibit the use of his visual sense during an ESP demonstration. Circa 1978. Image courtesy of Tony Oursler's personal archive.

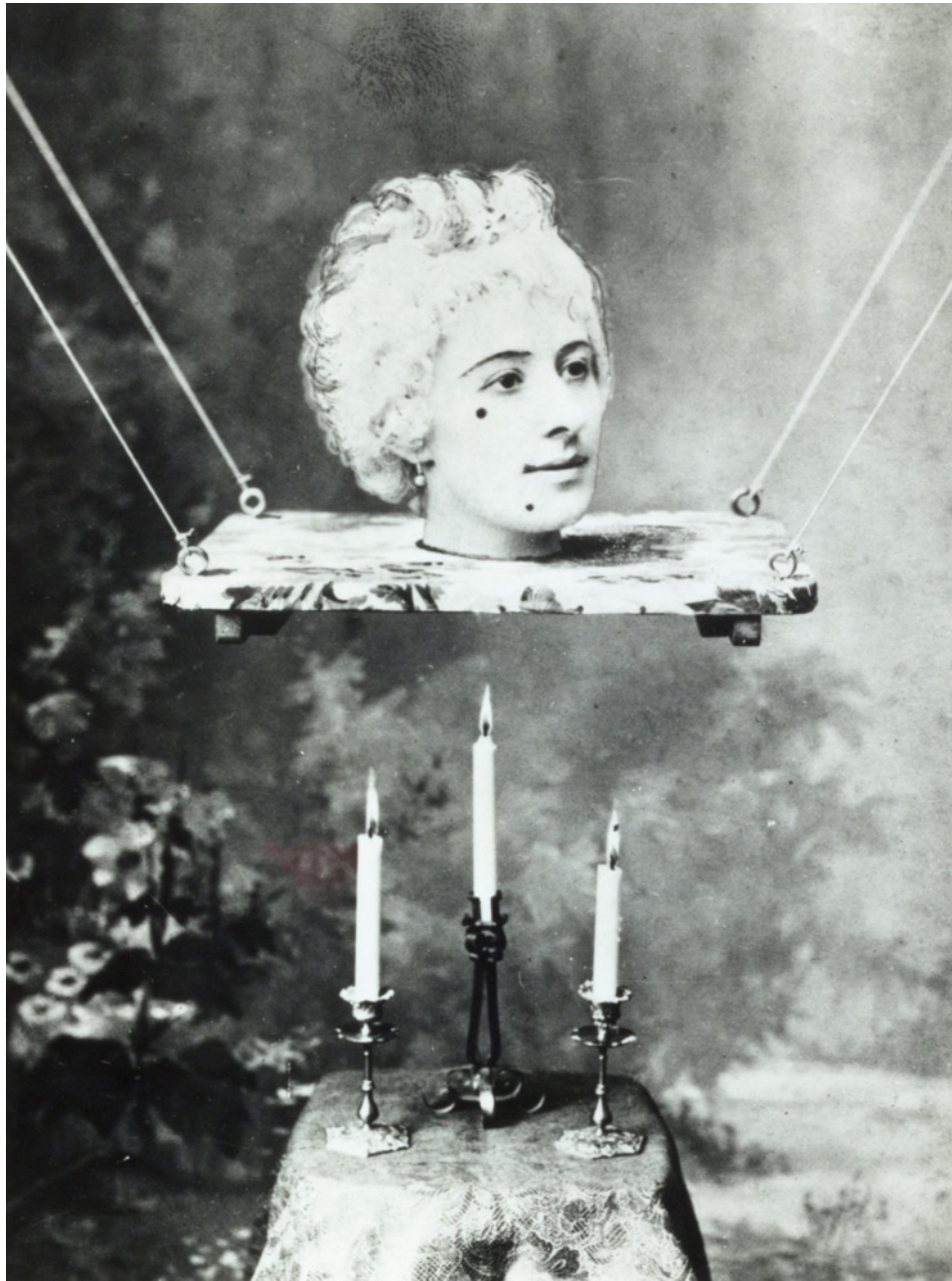
Forbes: What was the process of putting this publication together?

Tony Oursler: It's a long story but I'll make it short. My friends Beatrix Ruf and Tom Eccles of the LUMA foundation had many discussions about my archive and specifically a small group of images exchanged between my grandfather and his esteemed friend, Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle tried to convince my grandfather of the veracity of spiritualism through photographic evidence of my grandfather in turn used photographic evidence to disprove spiritualism. One thing led to another and we began to think about ways to organize my chaos, and the book started to take shape. The LUMA team is very sophisticated and it was great to work with them. We didn't want to do anything really obvious. the book was structured very openly and poetically with an image flow of some 1200 pictures and it's followed by 100 page of commissioned scholarly texts by 10 wonderful writers. This offers numerous ways of reading the archive. LUMA also commissioned a film which concerns the Doyle interaction. This is currently on view at the LUMA's space in Zurich, but that's another story.



*Possible production still from Orson Welles' Macbeth (1948).
Verso reads (typeset): "...[Orson] Welles wanted the result to be
weird and ghost-like, rather than to present the conventional
idea of a witch that is found in fairy tales... Image courtesy of Tony Oursler's personal archive*

Tony Oursler: Yes, I love the fact that the edges of these and other subjects in the book blur. Science moves forward but the detours and dead ends it takes can often be as interesting as the successes. And of course it's all filtered through the cultural lens that is forever morphing. The occult is distinctly connected to science at various points in history, specifically the links between alchemy and chemistry and astrology and astronomy. I'm also fascinated by the fact that some of what we know now in science will be disproved in the near future.



*Production still picturing Jehanne d'Alcy, actress and the wife of Georges Méliès in his film *La source enchantée*, circa 1890s. Image courtesy of Tony Oursler's personal archive.*

Forbes: Your work often examines how the mind can be affected by violence, media, sexuality, an mental illness. By providing this window into your influences with this book and exhibition, are you at all trying to illustrate to the viewer how your mind has been affected?

Tony Oursler: I wish that my mind could be that interesting. To tell you the truth I'm fascinated by systems and by beliefs. Whether we are conscious of it or not we participate in myriad overlapping systems, cultural and otherwise. The imponderable book is kind of an artwork in itself produced by the LUMA foundation. It's like a Venn diagram. There are a lot of surprises and it's very visual. The relationship between what I make and what you will see here in the book is often indirect, although many of the subjects you mention are present. For example: the history of early television and psychology tests. I'm sure sanity will be called into question as one turns the pages.



Image courtesy of Tony Oursler's personal archive. Photograph of Fulton Oursler as a young magician, 1909.

Forbes: What piqued your interest in the face's mechanical ability to express emotions?

Tony Oursler: There is a connection between my current project regarding facial recognition, computing, surveillance and some of the imagery in the book. The reading of the face is something that comes up again and again. Whether it's pareidolia (*editor's note: the psychological phenomenon involving a stimulus wherein the mind perceives a familiar pattern when there actually isn't one, a common one being the perceived "man on the moon"*) or a strange form of reading significance into moles and furrows of the face practiced in the Middle Ages. I can't seem to get away from it.



Publicity photograph of Harry Houdini, 1900. Houdini's most famous escape acts usually involved him being chained and locked in a jail cell. Image courtesy of Tony Oursler's personal archive.

Forbes: Are you frightened by electronic profiles of humans? If so, why?

Tony Oursler: The interplay between what it is to be human and these technological advances are in flux all the time. Most technology is an extension of human desire, yet technology is non-human. So we get many unexpected side results of these inventions. Privacy is a thing of the past. The individual is dwarfed in relation to the sheer volume of this information that's being collected and as we all die off it will just get bigger and bigger and live on and on. That is spooky.



Postcard of manipulated photograph titled "Snow ghosts in the forest." Switzerland, 1931. Image courtesy of Tony Oursler's personal archive.

Forbes: In your book, it says that you started becoming interested in the boundaries of science and the occult around 'The Influence Machine,' was there something that happened that kicked this off?

Tony Oursler: Like a lot of artists I'm an autodidact. I do a lot of research. I explore the world through my work and in the late '90s I was really interested in the kind of shadow history that was parallel to classical art history. Being an artist who is as interested in painting as I am in the moving image, I began to research the camera obscura and other ephemeral memetic activities. To keep track I constructed a simple timeline. The connection between the occult and technology becomes a metaphor for how we approach any new technology. I discovered that from the camera obscura to the computer, people have used technology to speak to the dead. For some, tech becomes an oracle. So in this work I use the occult as a metaphor for the individual in opposition to the corporate approach to technology.

Forbes: Did you ever get to talk about these subjects with your grandfather?

Tony Oursler: He was dead before I was born but there is some kind of a dialogue for sure!

Forbes: Do you think the hope that we may someday communicate with extra-terrestrial life is futile?

Tony Oursler: I defer to the great minds of physics who are convinced that this is an eventuality.

Forbes: By constantly pondering the effect that image has on the mind, do you feel you have become less susceptible to the seductive power of the image?

Tony Oursler: I think I was born that way.

Forbes: Why did you feel now was the right time to compile these materials and share them with the rest of the world?

Tony Oursler: The timing was serendipitous really. For years, collecting was a very private, almost hermetic thing. It's what I did in those odd hours, when there was nothing else to do. Even though it's a private activity, much of this material is very public in one way or another: it derives from popular publications, press materials etc. Collecting can also be connecting. I've met very interesting people along the way and discovered other worlds of collections. When LUMA approached me it seemed like a natural moment to get this stuff out there. It just felt right, and what better way to share this than a book?

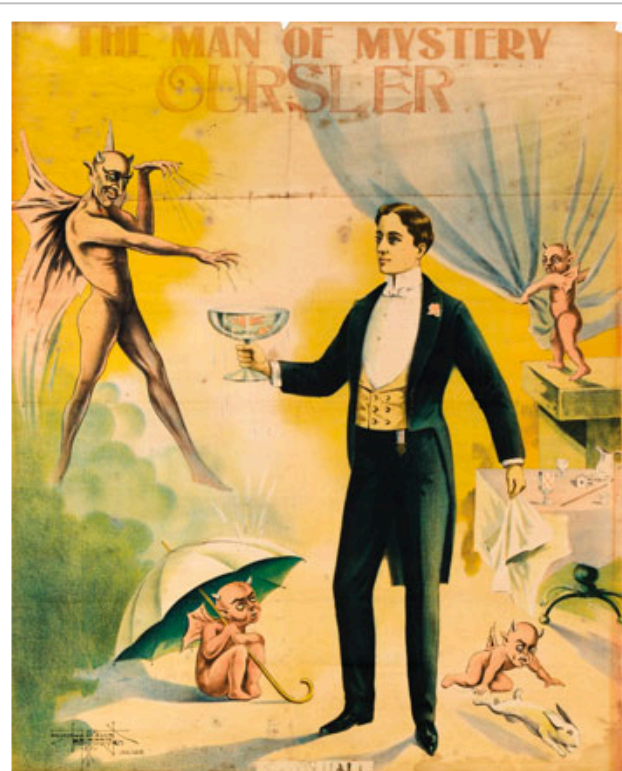
ARTNEWS

BLACK MAGIC: TONY OURSLER ON HIS UPCOMING LUMA EXHIBITION

BY *Hannab Ghorashi* POSTED 06/16/15 9:30 AM

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// He was into a lot of stuff,” said Tony Oursler one recent afternoon. He was referring to infamous British occultist Aleister Crowley, but he was also standing in the middle of his own stuff-filled Lower East Side studio. In addition to works in progress (projections of fluttering eyeballs), a brown labradoodle named Ruby, and a bust of Yoda, Oursler’s studio houses a collection of over 2,500 relics of human belief systems and magical thinking. Beginning with the *Spencer Collection*, an encyclopedic “cookbook” of the pre-Christian occult, Oursler’s archive spans areas of stage magic, thought photography, the paranormal, demonology, cryptozoology (Bigfoot and the like), optics, automatic writing, hypnotism, fairies, cults, color theory, and UFOs. For an upcoming LUMA Foundation–commissioned [exhibition](#) at Parc des Ateliers in Arles, France, Oursler will be showing his collection, sourced from auctions and flea markets alike since the mid-’90s, and publishing ten scholarly essays and several interviews (including one with a self-proclaimed UFO-abduction survivor).



A poster advertising stage magician Fulton Oursler, circa 1920s.
JASON MANDELLA/COURTESY THE ARTIST/ARCHIVE OF TONY OURSLER

Oursler will also premiere a special “4-D” film for the occasion—a contemporary film projected onto old photos—and maybe even a zine, a sort of coda for the whole project. “It’ll be about the way magical thinking is actually the norm in our culture,” he told me. “If you say that one third of the American public does not believe in evolution, or 50 percent of the American public has seen UFOs, or 40 percent of the American public believes in ghosts—these beliefs are not necessarily as far out as you think.”

A pioneer in the realm of video art, Oursler says that his work, which often manifests as low-fi, optical-illusion humanoid projections, has always dealt with belief systems. “I studied as a Conceptual artist,” he said, referring to his CalArts days. “And naturally I progressed beyond, because that was a previous generation. But looking at the Conceptual artists, I think I see certain rules in the way they made art, just like the Abstract Expressionists had their own way of creating, or the Suprematists in Russia had their own way of doing things. Art in itself is a kind of belief system. You have to believe in culture.”

Oursler inherited his interest in the science of human belief. His grandfather, Fulton Oursler—whom he doesn’t resemble, judging from a copper plate in the studio, engraved with Fulton’s profile—was a great friend of Harry Houdini’s. Houdini had learned the same tricks as the mediums who saw WWI’s unprecedented death toll as an opportunity to make money, and he and Fulton delighted in exposing them during séances. “My theory,” Oursler said, “is that some of these mediums would have become Surrealists had they even known that these performances had some other way of functioning in the world.”

He showed me ectoplasm, a gauze-like material that would emerge from the orifices—including ears, noses, and, in at least one instance, the colon—of mediums as proof of an otherworldly presence. “I have to show you something,” Oursler said, leaving the room. He returned with a black light, which he directed at two squares of ectoplasm dating back to the 1920s. Two phosphorescent outlines appeared—George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. “For all I know, this is slightly radioactive,” Oursler said. “I usually have a Geiger counter around. I got it in Kiev—I thought it would be fun to see what it was like.”

The INDEPENDENT

You won't believe your eyes

Tony Oursler is the latest artist to be consumed by our uneasy relationship with technology, finds **Hannah Duguid**

When artist Tony Oursler first used technology back in the late 1970s, he used video tape to make experimental films such as *The Weak Bullet*, in which two hands painted with eyebrows and lips acted out the characters of a man and a woman. The man died in the end from lead poisoning when a bullet fell in his drink. Forty years later, Oursler's still at it but the work is significantly more hi-tech. His latest work explores the most advanced technology – facial recognition.

He makes giant faces with video lips and eyes, arranged in a circle around the viewer. They stare blankly ahead; speak slowly and distorted with a low bass sound. One is a bearded black man with a pink painted mouth and X-ray eye, like the iris recognition immigration system used at airports. The way the eye moves evokes emotion. Is it a surprised, sad or angry eye? The latest technologies can translate our micro expressions, the tiny involuntary movements that betray how we truly feel. The faces are dotted with patterns like astronomy constellations, or mathematical grids. These are the areas a machine recognises us from – certain points on our face never change. There's a balance between high and lo-fi, futuristic

technology lodged within cut-out faces, which seem not much more sophisticated than the celebrity party masks people wear.

Oursler's work evolves alongside new technology, which he explores philosophically: how we interact with it, and what this might mean, does it make us more or less human, might it become the master of us? His sculptures feel sinister, a creepy atmosphere of surveillance surrounds them.

Artists engage with technology in ways as diverse as the technology itself. Belgian artist Cécile B Evans created a digital character for us to interact with online. Her

commission for the Serpentine Gallery is titled *Agnes* and she has a soothing female voice that asks how you're feeling today, and leads you on a personalised tour through the gallery website, according to your mood. She tells you stories, about the gallery's director, or a particular artist, and she draws you in. Agnes begins to feel real. It's like Spike Jonze's film *Her*, in which a writer falls in love with the operating system in his computer. It's an emotional engagement, and creates an odd sensation because something fake feels so meaningful to us. Agnes sends gifts to users who put their address in, and she questions her own existence; might she disappear into a universe of

data and be lost for ever?

American artist Jordan Wolfson incorporated the most advanced animatronic technology from the LA film industry to make a robot called Female Figure. She wears a transparent mini-skirt, skimpy knickers and white thigh boots, dances like a stripper, and has half a monster's face. She looks at herself in the mirror, and the viewer, and appears so hyperreal that we respond to her instinctively as if our brain can't help it. You know she's a machine but it doesn't matter because she feels like the real thing.

Cory Arcangel began his career with an artwork titled *Clouds*, based on the *Super Mario* video game. He erased everything but the background clouds from the game, which were then projected on the wall where they floated like futuristic embodiments of landscape painting. He made a YouTube video in which cats played out the music to Arnold Schoenberg's Op 11. He did this by finding online videos of cats stepping on certain piano keys, and constructed a digital collage in which they played out the exact notes for Schoenberg's score.

**Tony Oursler, Lisson Gallery,
London NW1 (0207 724 2739)
to 7 March**



Turning
heads: an
installation
view from
the Tony
Oursler show
at Lisson
Gallery