

Modern Painters
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CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Tony Oursler's Alien Invasion
Interview with Karen Wright

I AM SITTING IN TONY OURSLER'S STUDIO, or what I should perhaps call his building, for this is a space Oursler has been progressively colonizing since he moved in. Upstairs is his home, on the ground floor is his studio, and downstairs are his modelmaking and projection workshops. The building sits so far south and east of Manhattan that my taxi driver does not know what to call the area. I am here to continue previous conversations with Oursler and to discuss his current projects, but when I arrive, far from being the quiet and sequestered studio environment that many painters demand, it is bustling. Oursler himself is dressed casually, his hair ruffled by his habit of frequently running his hand through it. Nicole, his studio assistant, comes in with a roll of white paper that she starts to lay on the floor. I am surrounded by large and untidy piles of books. The one on top of the pile closest to me has a picture of a satyr with very perky horns on its cover and is entitled *The Keys to Satanism*. Elsewhere within the pile lie *Power Within Magic* and *Sex and the Occult*. Into the room clumps Jack, Oursler's two-year-old son by his wife, the painter Jacqueline Humphries. Jack has made a very gaudy green bejewelled crown and Oursler, at his son's behest, obligingly tries it on. Eventually, Jack is sent gently upstairs with his cries of 'Dadeeeee, Dadeeeee' ringing in our ears. I ask if it is hard for Oursler to work so close to home. He replies instantly: 'I like it. I like to be near him.' (Jacqueline, however, has a studio outside of the house.) We settle down to our conversation, but soon there is a ring at the door and a musician is ushered in. She is told to lie on the piece of rolled-out paper on the floor. Oursler starts to trace her prostrate body with a large marker pen and, instantly, his full attention is on his work. The musician's outline will form part of Oursler's *Exquisite Corpses* project.

The piece, commissioned for the Nyehaus space near Gramercy Park, reflects Oursler's longstanding involvement with the world of music, an involvement that stems back to his student days at the California Institute of the Arts, near Los Angeles. There, he had formed a band with fellow student Mike Kelly called The Poetics. Oursler was on keyboards, Kelly on drums. This band formed the basis for Oursler's *The Poetics Project*, a mixed-media work that was first shown at Documenta X in 1997, and later purchased for the Pompidou Centre's permanent collection.

Oursler hadn't gone to California to be a musician, however, he had gone to study

painting. Born in New York City in 1957, he grew up in a large Catholic family in Nyack, a suburb of New York. His father had been an editor of Reader's Digest for many years before founding his own magazine. Called *Angels on Earth*, it recounted people's personal experiences of meeting angels and attracted nearly two million subscribers in its first two years. As a child, Oursler had painting lessons with a great aunt, a painter who taught in the New York school system. Wanting to learn how to 'do it right' however, he applied and was accepted to CalArts in 1976, aged nineteen. With fellow students Kelly, Sue Williams, Stephen Prima and Jim Shaw, he studied under John Baldessari, and with Laurie Anderson and John Cage also on the faculty, the school offered a cross-cultural programme where students were encouraged, forced almost, to experiment. Oursler has said CalArts was the 'best thing that ever happened' to him. 'It was kind of a shotgun approach, hyperactivity and to try everything. I'm still like that now. You know: a little performance, a little sound, a little video, a little editing.'

While there, Oursler began to concentrate on video and photography. He recalls how the school had early 'portapak' video cameras, which produced washed-out, almost ghostly images. 'The cameras were already ten years old by that time, and moving images left ghost trails on the tape, streaks across the picture. I thought it was beautiful.' Quickly turning his back on the idea of painting, he was exposed to early video work, going to hear Nam June Paik lecture at UCLA and seeing pieces by Paik and Bruce Nauman at the pioneering Long Beach Museum of Art.

But, on returning to the East Coast in the 1980s, Oursler found New York an inhospitable environment for aspiring video artists. While his videos were circulated on the international scene, and featured in several prestigious group shows, it was a struggle for him to stay afloat financially. He returned home to stay at his parents' house in Nyack, and eventually took a teaching job at MIT.

I first became aware of Oursler's work through David Bowie, who had employed him to design his 1997 Earthling Tour. Without knowing the authorship, I instinctively loved the large eyeballs floating around the theatre, occasionally winking and blinking. In fact, Oursler had developed this particular technique back in 1991, while teaching at MIT, when he discovered the small portable video projectors that allowed him to liberate the figures from the fixed projection box and turn the images loose. Indeed, his use of this method in his 1992 project *The Watching*, which was shown that same year at Documenta IX, was to prove the turning point of his career. For here he was picked up by Metro Pictures, where he still shows along with Kelly, Shaw and John Miller.

Oursler has continued to work with musicians, and in his *Exquisite Corpses* project the outlines of seven musicians will be traced and turned into drawings with tiny speakers

embedded into the surface of each piece. Looped music by each performer will be played through the speakers, but since each piece of music will run for a different length of time, the likelihood of them running in synch is infinitesimally improbable. The effect Oursler aims to create is of various layers of sound.

It is not only sound that is variously layered in Oursler's work: meaning is too. On the opening night of Oursler's 2000-2 project, *The Influence Machine*, which was screened onto trees in London's Soho Square, the space was thronged with people taking in the talking, laughing, face-filled trees. The air was thick with an artificial fog and the overall effect was intensely surreal. Yet, many of those present were probably unaware that Oursler had selected that particular location because it was near to where one of the first public demonstrations of television had occurred, in January 1926 - a not dissimilarly unsettling experience for those observing that moment of technological breakthrough all those years earlier. Oursler admits that the evolution of his career is intrinsically linked to his passion for new technologies, and describes himself as a 'victim' of his own time. 'I used to watch television,' he says, 'and now I make videos.' Wherever he is headed next, one thing's for sure: paint just doesn't seem relevant to Oursler today.

KAREN WRIGHT I was looking through some of your catalogues recently and noticed that many of your works have a unifying thread.

TONY OURSLER Yeah, the way I produce my work is almost like a peristaltic system: the projects get huge and then they focus, and then they get huge and expand out, and then they focus again. A good example is *Judy*, a work that I produced in 1997 when I was invited to do a show at the Kunstverein in Salzburg. At the time I was doing a lot of research around multiple personality disorders and so I just cut loose; I tried to push myself as far as I could go. Then I stepped back and asked myself, 'What happened in this installation?' and I extracted certain elements from that process that I felt were generative. For instance, I came up with this 'wedged-under' motif in that work, and after it I did a number of precise pieces that involved this wedging of a passive-aggressive presence under found objects. It's a system that I've been using for years. Similarly, the pieces in my 2003 Lisson Gallery show came out of a big piece I did in Sweden at Magasin 3 in 2002, called *Station*.

KW So, are you in an expansive or contractive moment right now?

TO Right now I'm in a super-expansive moment. I'm working on a big outdoor piece called *Blue Invasion* that I'm doing for the Sydney Festival in January. I've given myself a chance to experiment wildly in every direction, even though there are a lot of

limitations to what can be done long distance and with a public piece. I'm going to be involving live actors, which is something I've never done before. In *The Influence Machine* (2000-2), there were guys operating the projectors or smoke machines and now I'm incorporating these operators as part of the piece. The idea behind the work is that an enormous meteor, made of translucent resin, lands in the park, and it's kind of pulsing - it has a sci-fi reference - with projections on three sides of it. It's surrounded by this scaffolding, as though it's being studied, and has left a trail of ripped-up earth as it came in. There's no explanation of the piece anywhere. You just stumble into the park and it's basically a classic, sci-fi scenario in the tradition of H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898). You have this life-form that lands on earth and possesses some people, including a news team - which is where the actors come in - and, in their possessed state, they use a T-ray camera on the audience. We're trying to get hold of the T-ray at the moment: I want to be the first artist to use one. It's currently being used by the government in airports and basically can see right through anything. What really got me into this subject was reading about SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) - a very cool group of linguists and scientists who are trying to communicate with entities in other worlds. They design stuff that gets sent into outer space, systems of coding and so forth that other cultures might be able to understand. The cool thing about SETI is that, as I was researching this project, I realized that they face the same dilemma that the artist does in trying to speak to the viewer. It's like you're trying to communicate with somebody who has...

KW A different perspective.

TO Yeah. They're like from a different world and a different culture. I take that metaphor as the basis for this piece: the artist or the artwork is the alien and the viewer is the earthling or the one who I'm trying to communicate with. The premise in *Blue Invasion* is quite funny because the alien entity has based its entire linguistic approach to the earth on light. The aliens' logic goes like this: light is the universal thing, or the universe even, so they figure that any civilization that can crack light and break it down into its components, like Newton did on earth, would naturally take those seven or eight colours and use them as the basis of communication, rather than numbers or symbols or language. It makes sense to them, but it doesn't make sense to us. It gives me a chance to write a wonderful text about colours and that's been a theme that's come up in my work over the years, time and again.

KW How great a part has science played in your art?

TO When I was a kid I wanted to be a scientist, but I was terrible at maths. That ruled me out completely. But I still have the *Oxford Dictionary of Physics* on my shelf, and I get *Scientific American* and *New Scientist* and things like that. I love to read about it. I get

super-inspired. So it enters into the work a lot. But I'm not a science snob - I've also been ordering enormous amounts of occult material, specifically occult science related to colour. It's been really great to read Edgar Cayce and Charles Babbage. I collect a lot of books but I really started to get into collecting this kind of quack science. I have a first edition of the very first book that was ever written on colour healing.

KW How do these kinds of sources manifest themselves in your work?

TO It's all about research - I spend a lot of my time researching and writing and then that goes back into the work. It's funny because I realize that the last thing anyone cares about is what the sculpture is saying - although I still get complaints that people can't hear it or whatever. It's in a fucking hall with 8,000 people - of course you can't hear it! The decibel levels of this kind of room are impossible. In my gallery shows I've taken it as a challenge to use super-high-quality sound.

KW The technological content of your work is obviously very important. But that's not something people usually think of as part of an artist's remit.

TO It's true. This afternoon I'm meeting a sound guy with a background in theatre. I've found that these theatre guys are very knowledgeable, much more so than people in the artworld. They help me solve technical problems in wonderful ways. It's so much fun because you can really do these incredible spatial, sculptural things with sound now. But technically you have to keep up. I find that that's a part of it. And it's sometimes not so easy to find what you want, so you have to go outside of your own field.

KW There is kind of a spiritual quality to the work that we don't normally associate with technology. Does putting the two things together ever seem like a paradox to you?

TO I always say you have to look for things in places that you wouldn't expect to find them. I'm really interested in collecting photography, and spirit photography in particular. It was *The Influence Machine* that first got me into that; it traced every successful use of technology to talk to the dead right up to today. I started collecting books about it, and then I found some photos, which was very exciting. Those were talismans for me because they were effectively the first use of special effects. In the back of *The Influence Machine* catalogue I wrote a kind of technological timeline, of the sort that I felt had been left out of our history. It was a model for a new approach to art history that incorporated the moving image and certain, more ephemeral technology such as the camera obscura. My aim was to show that even in the 1400s people were watching movies by putting a lens in their wall, sealing up their room to create a darkened space and putting actors outside who could be viewed through the lens.

KW You and David Hockney together.

TO Yeah, but I have a much more expansive approach than Hockney has. He's exclusively obsessed with the way it relates to painting. To me, the fact that people were sitting down and watching what were basically real-time movies trumps Hockney's entire thing. I respect his research for sure, but there's so much else that's been done that's been ignored.

KW Did you see *At the Origins of Abstraction* at the Musée d'Orsay in 2003-4?

TO Yes, I did. The great thing about the catalogue from that show - which unfortunately was never published in English - is that they recorded all the scientific connections that had informed artists. What I do, other people have been doing for years and years. I think that it's only recently, maybe, that artists have become so obsessed with pop culture or the way culture eats itself - producing art about art about art about art, art about magazines, art about other artists. To me it's interesting to step back and look at another way of approaching culture - through the inherent metasystems in our culture that are scientifically based, rather than just what's fashionable. I love fashion, don't get me wrong, but there's so much science happening now that people are divorced from. Perhaps that's because everything is disposable. Now, if your CD player breaks, you just throw it out and buy a new one. Whereas in the past, people used to open things up and learn a little bit about how they worked. I don't know how to do any sophisticated electronics or anything, but I know some basic principles.

KW But you're depending on the viewer being ignorant of the mechanics of your own works, aren't you?

TO In a way, but then if they look at it they put their hand up and go, 'Oh yeah, it's some kind of projector.' And for a moment they're part of the work, and then it breaks down. I'm not for total mystification. You need a little bit, but I like Brecht's attitude where you break it down and bring people back in and break it down again.

KW I'm interested in what happens to people when they look at a work of art. How do we perceive it? What goes on in our brains? Can the artist use that knowledge? Can you manipulate that?

TO What I've come to discover over the years is that, when it comes to technologies that have had an impact on culture, such as movies and television, certain formulas have worked. And when a formula is good no one tries to change it, they just do little

variations on it.

So, while I certainly wasn't the first person to project onto threedimensional objects, I made a slight change to the system and it made a big difference to the end result. Similarly, the T-ray chip that I'm currently looking to work with will supposedly cost only \$15 in the future and could be put into every video camera. Unless the NSA categorizes it like a controlled substance it will be responsible for a paradigm shift in the way in which we see the world.

Traditional theatre takes place within the space created by three walls. Then you have the fourth wall, which is the imaginary space between the audience and the players. That was later replaced by the movie screen, which, although two-dimensional, became a virtual space, an imaginary space; the fifth wall. And the sixth wall is what I'm trying to create, what all artists are trying to create. This is a new wall, one that we don't know the parameters of yet. It's like a transparency. It's a moving wall. But what does this wall do? Does it bring things together rather than separate things? Is it a permeable wall? Of course, it's all these things. What we really have to do is find the new paradigms. It's too easy for super-creative people to go to art school and film school then just buy into that system where they say, 'If the film is so many minute long, I need this many close-ups and medium shots and long shots and that adds up to a film.' They're not thinking in different terms, they seldom think: 'Why don't I make a 25-hour film?' When Martin Scorsese's film *Gangs of New York* came out in 2002, rumours abounded that they'd had difficulty getting him to cut it down because he wanted it to be three hours long. Yet, when you go to see the thing you feel it should have been ten hours long. It sucks at two hours because there's not enough.

KW Artists making feature films are breaking those rules though. Matthew Barney's *The Cremaster Cycle* is really one film, about 15 hours long...

TO Exactly. That was a great thing and I think it is a really good example for young people to follow. Matthew broke a lot of rules and he went his own way, which was almost more impressive than the work itself, I would say.

KW That kind of attitude is hard to find these days. The market controls the artworld, which in turn controls the artist. Ultimately, the market is in charge. In fact, it seems at the moment as though the big shows in New York are happening in the commercial spaces rather than in the museums, because they have greater spending power. This leaves the museums susceptible to hosting shows that simply fall into their laps.

TO That's a big problem here in New York. And when you have certain patrons pushing

their weight around you get these nullifications of the commercial galleries, too. I hope that that resolves. I think there's a certain level of embarrassment right now in New York, because all the good shows are really coming out of Los Angeles even though they have a lot less money and nobody goes to see art there. It's funny, but in a way it also makes sense. The place that's outside the mainstream is always where the breakthrough happens.

KW The last work of yours that we saw, *Perfect Partner* (2005), was a little outside the mainstream.

TO I don't know what the reaction was in London - I never saw the reviews - but I really, really enjoyed doing the piece. I thought visually it was fun and exciting: you had live double and triple exposures happening because you had light on the band. You had that image shifting positions all the time. Kim [Gordon] edited and shot some of the video and I wrote some stuff (although she wrote most of it) so it was like everybody did a bit of everything except, obviously, for playing the music. It was just a wonderful vehicle for the band to work with because they had a structure that was rigid but also very fluid at the same time. The band improvised a great deal, and the piece changed from city to city. That's the kind of stuff I love to do.

I've also collaborated with Dan Graham and Japanther on a piece called *Don't Trust Anybody Over Thirty*, produced by Sandra Antelo-Suarez. It was kind of a rock opera with puppets. Rodney Graham also did one or two songs for it. I've known Dan for 23 years and he's obsessed with generational overlappings, which is what the piece is about. It was great because he added this kind of science-fiction quality to it: the story takes place in the 1960s, but the music is punk from the 1970s, and then there are references to television shows from the 1990s. The project was a return to my early style of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I made all those videos with painted sets, dolls and puppets...

KW So, collaborations aside, are the dolls gone for good?

TO Don't worry, I'm coming back to them. I have plans to bring in more physical objects and less video but I have to finish this one cycle before I get there. I miss it too.

KW I think there's a human quality in those works, whereas your more recent projects seem to keep you at more of a distance.

TO That's an interesting way to look at it. You're right, there is a human quality in the puppet works, but there's also an alien quality, too. On the one hand, it's a blowing-up of detail, while on the other hand it's a refining of an absence. I have, in a sense, shed

certain things that I do want to bring back into my work. Not in the next show, but in the one after that: I have to plan my work a couple of years in advance. The next show that I do will be more focussed on the environment. *Bell Deep*, a work I created this year for the *Fairy Tales Forever* exhibition in Aarhus, Denmark, which celebrated the bicentenary of Hans Christian Andersen's birth, was a real breakthrough for me in that it involved five-point sound. I did it around the same time as my New York Met show, *Studio: Seven Months of My Aesthetic Education (Plus Some)*, which brought me to this new territory where I take the whole room and paint it with light. In my forthcoming Metro Pictures show, each room will be a different colour and it will be simple, thematically. I can't say exactly what the works will be like now, because they're still in the fruition period, but I'm working with some very high-end animators to try out a few effects, and also theatre people to work with the whole room as a canvas. I'm excited; it's all going to be very new for me.