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In the Studio With Tony Oursler: A Sculptor of the Air With Video

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

This article is the first in a series about watching and listening to artists at work.

"My work is more traditional than other media artists' work because I'm still making objects, just not conventional sculptures," says Tony Oursler, proving that everything in life, especially art, is a matter of perspective. He is surrounded at the moment by a mess of television antennas, plexiglass panels, wires, video cameras, projectors and other equipment crammed into his studio near City Hall. It's a Thursday afternoon, late March, a month before his new show, which opens tomorrow at Metro Pictures in Chelsea.

"I don't chisel marble," he says. "But to me plexiglass can be beautiful, sensual. The big difference between me and a sculptor or painter is not materials, necessarily. What I do has certain frustrations compared to drawing or painting, because it's a lengthy process with lots of steps, and sometimes I rely on artisans to blow glass or weld. So my satisfaction comes differently.

"But I can also shoot a video and look at the tape instantly, which is one of the advantages of working with video as opposed to film, and that can be satisfying in a way I find almost as immediate and direct as drawing. Then, aesthetically, the colors of video images, the way I can paint them, bleach them, the shimmering electronic quality of them, is, in terms of art history, just part of the continuum."

At 43, Mr. Oursler, despite the hound dog eyes and gray hair, cuts a boyish, wiry, hyperactive figure in running shoes and T-shirt, his standard attire. He is gregarious and quick to laugh, not least at himself, which makes sense considering how funny, although dark, his work is. His own success shocks him, charmingly. His career parallels the rise of video art, a medium that not coincidentally he has helped redefine by mixing moving images with sculpture and installation.

Lately he has branched into fresh technologies, too, experimenting with new 3-D, hologramlike images for a show at the Whitney Museum last summer, designing a work for the Museum of Modern Art's Web site, and making a CD-ROM with Stephen Vitiello, the composer, and the writer and artist Constance DeJong, with whom he has collaborated since the mid-80's. She is here today to be videotaped reading a script Mr. Oursler wrote for his coming installation at Metro Pictures.

This is the art studio of the 21st century: videotapes, computers, wires and antennas. Nonetheless, some things don't change and, notwithstanding the technology, when he is at work Mr. Oursler does what artists have always tried to do: exorcise a few demons, maybe, and make something new to look at.

He started out as a painter. Born in Manhattan in 1957, he was brought up in Nyack, N.Y., and taught to paint by his great-aunt before heading west and enrolling at the California Institute of the Arts, near Los Angeles. "When I teach I try to remember how screwed up I was back then," he laughs. "I had no idea what art was about." Mike Kelley, Sue Williams, Stephen Prina and Jim Shaw were classmates. John Baldessari and Laurie Anderson were teachers. John Cage was in the music department. Cal Arts was the future.

"Conceptualism was the thing there," Mr. Oursler recalls. "Form followed content. That was the principle. An idea might lead you to make a film or a Polaroid or a painting or an opera. I came wanting to paint and to learn `the right way,' and of course I found out there is no right way. Making art is how people sort through chaos, through life. So I started doing performances, installations.

"There was a lot of pressure to experiment, which was good. The school had some early video cameras, funky machines called porta- paks, which made fuzzy pictures and were like your eyes: they got blinded by bright light. I designed sets and painted them, then videotaped what I made to see how the lens compressed the space. The cameras were already 10 years old by that time, and moving objects left ghost trails on the tape, streaks across the picture. I thought it was beautiful.

"The medium suited someone impatient like me, although I'm not really a gearhead. I don't sit around dreaming about how great video is. But back then artists using video imagined broadcasting their own stuff on television. TV was supposed to become an alternative space to museums and galleries, the same thing people are saying now about the Internet. It seemed exciting at the time. Today there's a cult of the Internet, the way

there also was around virtual reality a few years ago, which turned out only to be about devising new Atari gun games."

Good Luck but No Money

Mr. Oursler moved back to New York in the early 80's and was picked up by Electronic Arts Intermix, an electronic gallery and video distributor, which handled Nam June Paik and William Wegman. "I didn't realize the prestige and good luck involved," Mr. Oursler says. Videotapes, unlike paintings or sculptures, could be copied and sent cheaply all over at once, so his work quickly spread across Europe, where museums and collectors developed an interest in video art and experimental installations before Americans did. By 1985 he had shown at the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art in Amsterdam and at the Pompidou Center in Paris.

In New York the Diane Brown Gallery showed a mix of his photographs, paintings, collages, videos and sculptures: three solo shows over seven years before the gallery closed. It sold a total of two of his drawings, one to a woman who worked for Diane Brown. The 80's, boom years if you were a Neo-Expressionist painter like David Salle or Enzo Cucchi or Julian Schnabel, were lean for video, still a new and discounted medium. Mr. Oursler exhibited regularly, but he barely made a dime from his art.

So he took odd jobs and recovered from a long bout of drugs and alcohol. "I had about three or four years of dark times," he says. "But being a compulsive worker saved me. Work was therapeutic. It's one thing to have a problem with drugs but another to have a problem and nothing to do with yourself."

Then came Documenta in 1992, the big survey show in Kassel, Germany, a turning point. Video hit the global radar screen. The curator, Jan Hoet, remembering Mr. Oursler from the Stedelijk, invited him to participate. He, Matthew Barney, Gary Hill and others showing videos had the spotlight. Within a couple of years, the Lisson Gallery in London and Metro Pictures had taken on Mr. Oursler and he was an established figure.

"I had no complaints before then," he insists. "There's pressure if you succeed early, and I'm not sure I could have handled it. Not that artists ought to struggle, but if you're out in the wilderness for a while you do what you want and find your own way."

Living Room Isn't Home

Two years ago he moved to this studio, a utilitarian, white-box, two- bedroom apartment, a recent renovation on a commercial block. His neighbors are mostly brokers and lawyers. The days of artists moving into unfinished SoHo lofts are long gone.

Big windows face low-rise offices, but because Mr. Oursler makes videos, sheets in front of the windows block the light. He lives in a bedroom in the back. The living room,

where he works, is haphazardly stuffed with folding tables, thrift store furniture, boxes, metal shelves, papers, magazines, cameras, bulletin boards, televisions, computers, stacks of videocassettes and odds and ends like sheets of plastic and wire mesh. A plaid pillow, the sole homey touch, is a bed for Woody, an 18-year-old mutt that tap-taps across the hardwood floor whenever Mr. Oursler is about to start videotaping.

Antennas, half a dozen of them, occupy one end of the living room. They're the sort that used to be ubiquitous on rooftops, bought by Mr. Oursler via the Internet because most local electronics stores don't stock them these days. Some have colored plexiglass panels and metal mesh sheets stuck to them: the materials on which Mr. Oursler plans to project videos. He has cut the panels into arcs, circles and saw-tooth waves.

Mr. Oursler, like many artists these days, trolls theatrical and industrial supply stores and skims video magazines for new electronics. They are to him what Pearl Paint is to a painter (although he shops there, too). Ten years ago he came across an ad for a miniature projector in the back of Videomaker that changed everything for him. "Within half an hour of getting the projector out of the box, I projected a little image of a head on a Barbie doll," he says. "I suddenly realized I could project video onto sculpture, a big leap."

It was big because projecting videos of talking heads onto dummies animated sculpture, a fresh idea, and also released the moving image from the appliance, the box, meaning the television screen or video monitor. Projected onto dummies — or onto smoke or water or trees or other surfaces — moving images entered the real world, our space.

For Metro Pictures, the idea is that projected heads, including Ms. DeJong's, will seem to float on the transparent panels and also bounce onto the ceiling and walls. "The effect is supposed to be of all these ghostly figures above you, around you," he says.

Personalizing the Monolith

A couple of years ago Mr. Oursler started looking into the Foxes, a family of spiritualists who claimed to talk to the dead via Morse code.

"Then I started playing around with old microphones, because later spiritualists used radios and microphones: they would set up a microphone and try to hear spirit voices by tuning radios to dead frequencies. After that I went to Lily Dale, an island community for psychics on a lake in upstate New York. I was curious about the link between spiritualism and technology, the idea that you could communicate with the dead through machines. Microphones and radios eventually got me thinking about antennas.

"I've always been intrigued by how people turn corporate and technological culture to their own purposes, how people personalize the corporate monolith. Whenever some new technology arrives — including rock 'n' roll, because of amplification — people say it's either salvation or the devil. Movies and television, now the Internet. The same thing. I'm fascinated how we want to put ourselves in a kind of trance through these technologies, to immerse ourselves in them so that we can experience something we don't want to confront in real life. To dance with the devil, you might say."

He adds: "When I bought the antennas I noticed manufacturers gave them names like `ghost killer,' to advertise how they fixed blurry reception. For me, the idea that an object could transform what's invisible — waves in the air, electronic signals — into something visible was interesting, not just because of the spiritualists but because it seemed a metaphor for art: making visible an intangible sensation. I like the utilitarian beauty of an antenna, too, the 1950's sci-fi connotation, and the fact that the design is figurative: like an arm grabbing information from air."

Hard Pose, Stiff Neck

In the middle of the room is a Sony DSR-PD150 high-resolution video camera. To a video artist, differences among cameras, projectors, monitors and tapes are like differences among marble, wood, steel and clay to a sculptor. Mr. Oursler fusses about the characteristics of plexiglass and metal on which to project images, about projector bulbs and the volume capacity of speakers. These are his formal and technical concerns.
Sometimes the grainy quality of a low resolution camera is what he wants. Projecting images onto mesh and colored plastic, he thinks a sharper picture is better now.

The camera faces a desk with an upright board nailed to it. Ms. DeJong pokes her face through a hole in the board, as one would at a carnival stall. This is how Mr. Oursler films heads with nothing else in the picture. The device is torture for her, and she requests neck rubs during breaks. He complies, laughing. It's a familiar routine for them.

Ms. DeJong's incantatory voice suits Mr. Oursler's oblique, deadpan texts. This script, four typed pages, sounds sinister but wry, a stream-of-consciousness riff on telecommunication devices, with erotic double- entendres. "I wanted the script to have a found feeling, like some mistranslated instruction manual," Mr. Oursler says.

One part of it is: "I'm out of range again weak weak weak in the knees." Another: "You think I'm some sort of spin-offswitching from me to you and back again reflector feed fedup to here fuzzy features spin drift stabilize receive commands from the master links."

Ms. DeJong's voice, according to the plan, will barely be heard in the gallery, like someone who is speaking softly but intently at the next table in a restaurant. Mr. Oursler writes in a way unlike most artists, who use chance or collage or political slogans or fortune-cookie proverbs. It's a homegrown poetry. You can listen to part or all of his scripts, from the beginning or starting in the middle. The style basically matches how people experience art. They come and go in the gallery. Attention spans differ.

Ms. DeJong scans the text. She hasn't seen it before. Mr. Oursler tinkers with lights. Having made tests on the plexiglass, he knows to light her in sharp contrast, but he wants her image to flicker, so he installs a raking light beside her and holds another light in his hand to wave around once the camera is rolling. Ms. DeJong blinks into the brightness and starts reading. Three times through, slowly. He will decide later which version is best.

"Maybe because Tony is not a writer," Ms. DeJong says afterward, "he feels free to investigate language and invent a style that conflates ambient speech, passing thoughts and normal conversation, without drawing attention to the fact. Language is the timekeeper and also the source of action in his work, because he uses stationary images, talking heads. It's a personal style, and inventing your own voice is the hardest thing to do as a writer."

Making the Final Cut

It's now three days before the opening at Metro Pictures, and Mr. Oursler is installing the show with assistants while his girlfriend, the painter Jacqueline Humphries, watches. He has completed eight antennas and four projections onto egg- shaped sculptures he calls pods, but it looks as if only eight works in total will fit into the gallery's three different-size rooms. "I want to give each thing space but not too much space," he says. "The antennas live well together in the studio, but here I have to decide which ones go together, like which members of a family get along."

The gallery has decided to build a wall to block most light from outside so the projections can be seen, and he realizes he will also need separate speakers instead of the ones on the projectors because the rooms are reverberant. "I don't want people to be frustrated. I want a kind of auditory hallucination. There's a distinction between sound that's intriguingly low and annoyingly inaudible."

The videotape of Ms. DeJong, now transferred to DVD, goes with a slender six-foot antenna that at the moment is titled "I in the Sky," although Mr. Oursler changes his mind about titles up to the last minute. The antenna consists of two parallel lattices of short aluminum rods between which he has sandwiched thin sheets of mesh. Ms. DeJong's image has been cut down to just her lips, pink slivers, multiplied six times, the six images arranged in a grid, phasing in and out. (Mr. Oursler has an assistant who knows how to program computers to do this task.)

"It's supposed to be like a visual canon or fugue. At first, when I was doing the editing, there was a babble of sound with all six going at once out of sync. Now I hope it's more audible and lyrical. I want it to be the sound of a group of voices, but not cacophony.

"For years I felt nobody understood what I was doing, that everyone said I was criticizing television because I was making videos. If it was video art, it must be about television. These days video is no longer new and people understand this sort of work better, I think, but then here I am doing a whole show with television antennas. So I hope people don't just assume this is about TV. I think it's about conjuring up psychological states, about conjuring up internal spirits, and reimagining ourselves through technology."

Casson Demmom, an assistant, places a projector, the size of a shoe box, on a metal stand that Jason Czerwonka, another assistant, welded last night. Mr. Oursler turns the projector on. Ms. DeJong's lips appear, six sets of them, shimmering against the reflective metal, which makes her flesh sparkle. The image also bleeds through the screen to the wall behind, enlarged but ghostly amid the antenna's shadow. It is visible on the opposite side of the screen, too, mirrored and dim, another variation on the same picture.

Mr. Oursler looks satisfied, for the moment. "You never know. That's the experience of the artist. Maybe people will just walk in and say: ‘Oh no, babbling heads again.’ But when you're lucky and you try something new, you also have a chance as an artist to discover what you didn't know before. To learn from your own work. That's really the only reason to do it."

Tony Oursler's exhibition of new work opens tomorrow at Metro Pictures, 519 West 24th Street, Chelsea, (212) 206-7100, and continues through June 16.

He also has a new installation at the Queens Museum of Art, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, (718) 592-9700; another in the cafe at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street in Manhattan, (212) 708-9400; and yet another at the Tate Modern in London.

Two retrospectives of his work are traveling abroad. One is to open shortly in Lisbon, and the other in Kiev.

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