

Tony Oursler



Videotapes, Dummies, Drawings, Photographs,
Viruses, Light, Heads, Eyes, and CD-ROM

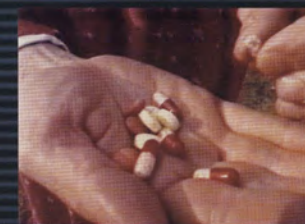
City Gallery, Wellington 1999



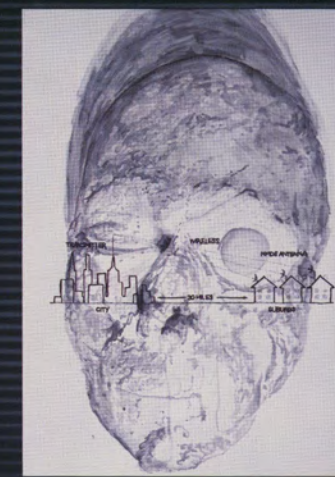
Trash (Empirical) Black Cat 1998, c-print on aluminium



Satan's Daughter 1996, mixed media, Collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo



Stills from Toxic Detox (collaboration with Joe Gibbons) 1992, videotape 27mins



Communication Network 1998, acrylic and mixed media on paper

Tony Oursler's work combines the schlock-horror effect of evil toys at Halloween with the dense lyrical intensity of a David Lynch film; realising an uneasy mixture of repugnance and ethereal beauty.

Oursler was originally a painter, and this traditional training is evident in many aspects of the exhibition, from the exploratory drawings to the detailed backdrops in the video pieces. He was part of the first generation to follow in the footsteps of pioneer video artists such as Nam June Paik. Paik, Dara Birnbaum and others began making TV sculptures in the 1950s, when the new medium was at its most exciting and unexplored. However, Oursler's work takes the television element in the sculpture a step further. Whereas for his predecessors the box which encloses the television 'set' was a central part of the artwork, Oursler— from the generation that takes TV for granted as part of everyday life— sought to remove the image from its frame.

From the first videos he produced in 1976, Oursler presented the works as installations, exhibiting them with handmade props and 'characters' he made for the production. The installations developed from simple painted backdrops until the late 1980s, when they were being constructed from materials such as metal and glass. Gradually Oursler's video work moved away from structured pieces. He began to experiment more with the power of sound and with the fragmentation of images, disrupting the temporal senses of the viewer and giving the work a compelling and obsessive density.

Oursler made his first dummies in 1989, because he wanted to create something sculptural. Originally the figures were headless; rather than to project an image, they were created to express a situation— one which provoked discussions about power plays, authority, the impact of technology on society, emotional longing and the disassembly of the body. Beginning as an experiment in time expansion, he started to give the dummies pre-recorded features, using small LCD projectors to screen performances on to the now fully-formed figures. Oursler was able to convey his interest in the relationship between pictures and sound, language and text. While making the first of his *Crying Dolls* Oursler was researching and deconstructing the tradition of American narrative cinema. The multiplicities and effects of language and prepared texts have been a feature since Oursler's first videos, harking back to his childhood in a family of writers and editors. In one installation, the dummies explained the plots of movies as if to a friend. As Oursler has said, "I really love the way that one is forced to imagine the images through this process of retelling".¹

The viewer is compelled to participate in Oursler's displays. Oursler has said that he was dismayed when he read

some years ago that the average time a gallery patron spends looking at a piece of art is 1.5 seconds. Subsequently, he has sought to position his work as "a collaboration with the viewer ... Just creating the place in the viewers where they will accept the work as a permanent part of themselves is in itself really difficult. A lot of work that claims to have a social position has no respect for the intelligence of the viewer."²

Oursler challenges this notion of intelligence and insightfulness, playing games with his viewers to test their perception. The eyes convey their emotion on one level, but peer more closely and they replay the cause of that emotional response in their reflection of the screen. The heads immersed in water seek to connect with their 'visitor' like a hospital patient in a drug-induced coma, whose feelings are submerged and barely tangible as they struggle to communicate with the outside. At the same time, these works conjure up memories of both the 1960 classic horror movie *The Brain That Wouldn't Die* (in which a doctor reanimates the head of his fiancée, who has been decapitated in a car accident— teased by his assistant, the head turns nasty and wreaks revenge) and *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble* from 1976. This cheesy teen TV movie starred John Travolta as a boy born without an immune system, forced to live in a germ-free plastic bubble. This pure environment, however, could not protect him from the emotions of the outside world.

The dummies and dolls are a vehicle for Oursler to explore the evolving relationship between the body and technology, and the ongoing dissolution of the barriers between the natural and the synthetic worlds. On one level, the works diverge from conventional narrative structure; there is no plotted action or time limit. At the same time, the equipment required to operate the bodies is as obvious a part of the exhibition as the figures it enlivens. Indeed, Oursler has described technology as "an amplifier of instinct."³ This is illustrated in its extreme by the *Talking Light* works, in which Oursler disregards the conduit of the human form for the most essential sound and light show; the light bulbs (some of which flash on and off) audibly impart messages and tell stories, often instilled with human sensibilities, like the ability to feel pain or sexual pleasure.

This exhibition is the first occasion on which Oursler's photographic series *Trash (Empirical)* has been publicly displayed. These pictures, taken over four years from 1994-1998, take Oursler's exploration of narrative structure and the way in which this is communicated to the viewer into a new realm. Unlike the dummies and videos, which are conceived and produced by the artist, these photographs are of other people's random constructions; piles of rubbish left on the roadside. As any avid connoisseur patrolling the streets

during an inorganic rubbish collection will tell you, these photographs— while they have no text or pre-determined narrative— are haphazard records of countless situations and incidents. The 'empirical' of the series' title is taken from the philosopher Voltaire's critique of social hierarchy in 18th century France. Voltaire conceived this system from his observations of the behaviour of the various social classes and their interaction with each other— drawing conclusions and inferences about beliefs hidden below the surface from what was outwardly apparent. Likewise in these photographs Oursler explores the underlying elements of people's lives by displaying the resultant debris, in a manner which can be discussed, dissected and is open to unlimited conjecture. These works remove Oursler from his interactive role with the viewer. Here he is a student of human nature, documenting what he sees but not participating; a spectator who does not participate in the choice of material or its composition.

The photographs that make up *Trash (Empirical)* give another, more lateral element to Oursler's research and investigation of popular culture, language, and visual signifiers. We, as viewers, are an integral part of this research; experiencing the work as unrelated observers, yet recognising ourselves in the scenes before us, identifying (as we do with Oursler's 'characters') with the anonymous sculptors and the aloof photographer.

Oursler's work is presented here in nine divisions or sections— videotapes, dummies, drawings, photographs, viruses, light, heads, eyes and CD-ROM— which are intrinsically connected. He uses the term 'meta-media' to describe how he extends the limitations and definitions of each medium beyond its conventional use. This can be seen in the individual pieces— the detailed theatrical backdrops which characterise the videotapes, the narrative that fuels the sculpture— and in the exhibition as a whole. All the components of the exhibition are linked to one another, regardless of how disparate they seem, as factors in Oursler's ongoing research. His work is developed intuitively, progressing in stages, yet engaged in a crucial dialogue with every other element.

Much as his subject matter is drawn from the everyday, Oursler's actual process of working is influenced by the domestic and the notion of family. There are also common features in the subject matter, many of which are recurring themes: social isolation, violence, the body, sex, the way in which the human body relates to technology, power, desire. *EVOL* ('love' spelt backwards) is an primary study of human connection: "How can you love someone that doesn't love you. It seems that love— cause— it's a two-way thing. And how can love exist when part of you has died and part of it is frozen?"

In *Spinout* Oursler presents the story of man's evolution into the future, beginning with a biblical shepherd gazing into the starry night and progressing through visions of a demon, a god and ET, to end with God shedding tears for the Man he created. The work contains many of Oursler's favoured themes. He recurrently deals with the Big Questions: Good and Evil, Creation, Love. Oursler draws on his own Catholic background, combining this knowledge with the televisual and literary techniques that simplify issues for popular consumption (his grandfather was the author of *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, a Bible for beginners which was adapted into a movie).

Oursler's work is attention-grabbing, and holds the viewer's interest through soap opera styling. His 'characters' exploit raw emotion for maximum effect (such as the dolls and eyes which sob unceasingly) and spout clichés: "Let's keep it together now ... Look at the bright side." Analysis of the images and the soundtracks, and a consideration of the work as parody, comes later. The self-consciously stagey backdrops, the stream-of-consciousness narration, the awareness that the face is the most appealing and affecting part of a person (hence the 'close-up shot' and a concentration on the eyes and mouth) are devices thoroughly understood both by Oursler, a consummate artist of the televisual age, as well as the producers of commercial TV drama.

Oursler also knows how to play other mind games. He has made a particular study of Multiple Personality Disorder and its treatments, and has appropriated the language and methods of psychotherapy in some of his pieces, such as in the questionnaire read out by the *MMPI Test Doll* (1993): "Sometimes I feel as if I must injure either myself or someone else ... I like to cook ... I certainly feel useless at times ... I would like to be a soldier ... I have often lost out on things because I couldn't make up my mind soon enough ..." Oursler endows multiple personalities on his works: those of the artist, the 'characters' and the viewer.

Oursler's work is not pretty. His rudimentary stuffed dummies, images of garbage, rough drawings and home-made videos cut to the deep, dark quick of human emotion and reaction. There is humour and there is pain, and myriad other responses which, once triggered, linger and return.

Danielle Tolson
City Gallery, Wellington 1999

1 "Video is Like Water". Tony Oursler interviewed by Simona Lodi, *Tony Oursler* exhibition catalogue, Galleria 1000eventi, Milan and Edizioni Charta, Milan 1998, p.28.

2 "Tony Oursler: Technology as an Instinct Amplifier", interview by Matthew Ritchie, *Flash Art*, January/February 1996, p.76.

3 *ibid*, p.78.



Empathy Wheel, from Fantastic Prayers (collaborative multi-media project with Constance de Jong and Stephen Vitiello), 1994-1998, published by the Dia Center for the Arts, New York

Director's Message

We live in an age when cable TV is beamed not only to industrial cities but to remote tribal villages, and when shipwreck survivors sing the theme song from the film Titanic as they clamber into their lifeboats. Needless to say, it is technology and the media that have shaped such dramatic and often surreal developments in contemporary life.

As the world has evolved rapidly, so art has had to change its methods and objectives in order to explore the new realities that are now an inescapable part of everyday experience. Since his career began in the 1970s, New York-based multi-media artist Tony Oursler has made these new technological realities his subject, producing works that explore our contemporary immersion in digital culture.

Positioning himself firmly in the TV generation, Oursler is inspired by television and film rather than the fine art tradition— that said, however, his work is rich in references to such staples of the Academy as the portrait bust and the still life. One of the world's leading contemporary artists, Oursler makes work that is in demand around the globe for its compelling vision of our media-driven society.

It is with great pleasure that the City Gallery Wellington presents this major survey of work by Tony Oursler. Enabling New Zealand audiences to observe and experience key developments in modern and contemporary art has always been an important aim of City Gallery Wellington. In the Tony Oursler exhibition, visitors will be brought 'up to the minute' with art's exciting leaps into new media and digital technology at the end of the 1990s.

Oursler's art— of which the 'dummies' are perhaps his best known component— is mesmerising, confrontational and sometimes disturbing. City Gallery Wellington is committed to staging such energetic and daring shows, which we know will stimulate and challenge our visitors, and add an important dimension to the cultural experience of New Zealanders.

A similar commitment to ground-breaking use of the imagination and media is shared by Saatchi & Saatchi, Wellington, who are generously sponsoring Tony Oursler. This exhibition continues a dynamic partnership which has moved on to an exciting new level with the formation of the City Gallery Wellington Foundation, of which Saatchi & Saatchi are a founding corporate principal benefactor. We also gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Eckhard Schneider, Director of the Kunstverein Hannover and the organiser of this comprehensive exhibition. The City Gallery is proud to be a partner in an international tour which includes the Kunstverein Hannover; the Museum of Art in Tel Aviv; and the Malmö Konsthall in Sweden. We thank all of the above, and of course Tony Oursler himself— not only for the visionary quality of his work, but in enabling the City Gallery, Wellington to fulfil its mission to bring exhibitions of the highest international calibre to Wellington.

Paula Savage
Director

Tony Oursler was born in New York in 1957. He studied at the California Institute for the Arts, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1979. His work has been exhibited throughout the world, including England, Germany, Canada, France, Greece and the Netherlands. He has held solo exhibitions since 1981, including Video Viewpoints at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1981, Sphères d'influence at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris in 1986, and a self-titled exhibition in 1995, which was seen at the Portikus, Frankfurt, Les Musées de la Ville in Strasbourg, the Centre d'Art Contemporain in

Geneva and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Oursler has featured in several important group exhibitions, including Video and Language at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1989, Tendances Multiples (Video of the 1980s) at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris in 1990, Home Video Redefined: Media, Sculpture and Domesticity at the Centre of Contemporary Art, Miami in 1994, Young Americans: New American Art in the Saatchi Collection at the Saatchi Gallery, London in 1996, The Body at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney in 1997. Oursler has featured in

several art festivals including Documenta 8, 9 and X in Kassel, Germany (1987, 1992 and 1997 respectively), the 1989 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, ARS 95 Helsinki at the Museum of Contemporary art, Helsinki, Finland in 1995, the 10th Biennale of Sydney in 1996, and the 1997 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Formerly a teacher at the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, Oursler currently lives and works in New York.

Tony Oursler— Videotapes, Dummies, Drawings, Photographs, Viruses, Light, Heads, Eyes and CD-ROM is organized by the Kunstverein Hannover.

This exhibition is generously sponsored by:

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- City Gallery, Wellington, Civic Square, PO Box 2199, Wellington, New Zealand. www.city-gallery.org.nz, phone (04) 801 3021, fax (04) 801 3950.
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