Face, Media, and Social Flatness: On “the veiled clarity of the substances called for by the closed switch”

John C. Welchman

—“To the twins of the future”

The Influence Machine, 2000-2002
Outdoor video installation

The only thing that is natural to us is to represent what we see three-dimensionally; special practice and training are needed for two-dimensional representation whether in drawing or in words.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein[1]

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Blackwell, Oxford 1963, p. 198.

Let’s switch back, first, to *Tony Oursler: My Drawings 1976–1996*, the first publication dedicated to Oursler’s two-dimensional work.[2] Here we encounter an unabashedly—almost flagrantly—variegated range of formats, styles, and genres. The volume includes apparently conventional media such as watercolor and acrylic, sometimes laminated in plastic, as well as drawings per se in pencil, tempera, and ink, which use such common supports as paper, cardboard, foam core, and canvas, but also unusual ones such as denim and a plastic pistol. We also find video production stills (from *Life of Phyllis* and *Plastic Surgery*, both 1976, *Grand Mal*, 1981, or *Air Life Savers*, 1991, for example); several collage-like, mixed media works whose supplements to the inscription of form on a surface or volume include human hair, clay, wood, plastic gel, aluminum foil, electric lights, cast glass, photography, video camera lenses … even strychnine, among other elements. The anthology includes “installations” of painted paper and cardboard (such as that for *Twilight: Son of Oil*, 1981); “props” from videos (e.g. *Modernist Head (Alien)* from *Spin Out*, 1983); and what we might describe as special circumstance drawings deriving “from videotape from installation” (in this case, *Diagram of an Alien Visitation in Bedroom*, 1983, in collaboration with Gloria). And this is not all. There are “installation detail[s]” (*Ziggurat* from *Spheres d’Influence*, 1985, which includes acrylic on wood, VCR, TV, videotape, mirror, motor); a computer animation still titled *Death by Office*, from the installation *Pyschomimeticscape* (1987); objects that in other circumstances might be described as sculptures, such as the marble and brass *Trophy* (1987); and, finally, images from the artist’s signature video projection installations, such as *Let’s Switch* (1996), which rounds out the book with its

2. Tony Oursler: *My Drawings 1976–1996*, exh. cat., Kasseler Kunstverein/Oktagon, Kassel/Cologne 1996.

amalgam of “cloth, wood, video projector, vcr, vhs tape,” and “performer: Tracy Leipold.”

We learn several things from this Borgesian assemblage of works and descriptions. Most important, perhaps, is that drawing for Oursler is not a category reserved for mark making on a two-dimensional support. It is instead a particular mode of appearance of the seemingly flat. What, then, must we make of the relation of Oursler’s adjudication between work in two and three (and other) dimensions to the long history of avant-garde negotiations with these and related parameters, which, in different material and conceptual inflections, makes up one of the most inclusive definitions of vanguard or experimental art in the passage from modernism to postmodernism and beyond? This is a question that turns on what we can term the territoriality of art practices, and the constitutional dispute between genres, formats, and platforms: most obviously between painting and sculpture, or flatness and illusionistic depth; but also between sculpture, film/video, and architecture; between the static conditions of the artwork and various intimations of movement; between art and non-art materials; and eventually between the designations and definitions of “art” and wider categories such as events, bodies, or life itself.

The history of video art occupies a special place in this genealogy, and Oursler’s work, I will argue, plays a crucial role in the formation of new aesthetic territorialities for a new technological medium, offering a creatively salient reflection on the move from the relative flatness of screen and monitor to the dimensional palpability of projection and installational space; from the declensions of set and backdrop to the physical appearance of objects and images; and from the mass cultural circulation of tv to the projective individualism of the art world talking head. The scope and implications of Oursler’s position, and its difference from and resistance to the reflexive meta-discourses of the 1980s art world, are nowhere better attested than by the investment of the first generation of media and new media critics—working in the later 1960s and later 1990s respectively, in a range of definitional questions turning on issues of space and dimensionality, that anticipate and inform Oursler’s own deliberations. From the outset, the provisional and uncertain dimensionality of the television image was central to the debate about its domestic appearance and social extensions. In “Television: The Timid Giant,” Marshall McLuhan, for example, contends that in contrast to the density and depth of field of the film image, early television screens offered a low-intensity, “flat, two-dimensional mosaic” of forms apprehended by a viewer who “unconsciously reconfigures the dots into an abstract work of art on the pattern of a Seurat or Rouault.”[3] McLuhan’s aestheticist metaphorics notwithstanding, it is clear that in his signal and influential reading, the flat, patterned, and relatively non-perspectival condition of the television image was a key paradigm for the inflection in media history represented by the new technology. McLuhan, interestingly, points out that the provision of stage sets in the tv studio offered some intimations of three-dimensional perception, based on the binary separation between foreground protagonists and various scenographic backgrounds. It was in the space of this binomial arrangement, of course, that Oursler commenced his work in experimental video in the mid-1970s. In the process, he investigated another of the definitional separations to which McLuhan alludes, that between the ultra-two-dimensionality and diagrammatic reduction of the cartoon and the mid-range detail, depth, and definition of tv.[4]

3. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Routledge, London and New York 2001, p. 341, 342.

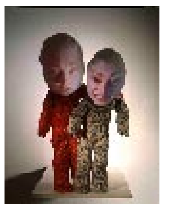
McLuhan’s debate with the constitutional flatness of the tv medium is rejoined and extended three decades later by critics such as Lev Manovich who attend to the new spatial formations engendered by the computer and its monitor. In *The Language of New Media* Manovich notes that the “concept of a screen combines two distinct pictorial conventions: the older Western tradition of pictorial illusionism in which a screen functions as a window into a virtual space, something for the viewer to look into but not to act upon; and the more recent convention of graphical human-computer interfaces which, by dividing the computer screen into a set of controls with clearly delineated functions, essentially treats it as a virtual instrument panel. As a result, the computer screen becomes a battlefield for a number of incompatible definitions: depth and surface, opaqueness and transparency, image as an illusionary space and image as an instrument for action. The computer screen also functions both as a window into an illusionary space and as a flat surface carrying text labels and graphical icons.”[5] Few artists have worked as insistently as Oursler across the spaces that define the technological moves from tv to monitor, low lines of resolution to hi-definition, and tube to lcd. Mediated by a longstanding commitment to drawings, the shift from the sets and surfaces of his single-channel pieces to the breakthrough projection of body- and speech-bearing video onto dummies and objects turned the old-order dichotomy between two and three dimensions inside out. It bears witness to a palpable dissolution of the genres of painting, sculpture, and installation, which converge and separate according to a new performative logic distributed by an endless roster of virtual bodies conjured up by combining speech and gesture as affective virtualities. In this process, depth and reduction become allies in the project of recalibrating the surfaces and run-offs of bodies—whose “skin,” real and imagined, operates as a media membrane to trap and filter the corporeal encounter.

4. In an interview with the Oursler in 1992, Graeme Sullivan offers a useful account of the artist’s negotiation between media image and social depth through techniques of “layering” and “muffling”: “In challenging the viewer to invest in the art encounter as a critical process of negotiating meaning for themselves, Oursler used a process he described as ‘layering.’ The use of time-based technologies meant the tv monitor became the electronic field where this artistic encounter was played out. While the tv screen was assumed to reflect reality it could also be considered to be a construction of layers of ideas and images that were mobile in that they could be seen to emerge from, and recede into, what Oursler called a ‘muffled kind of electronic grid’ whereby meaning was seen to bubble to the surface.” Graeme Sullivan, artist interview, November 24, 1992, cited in “Critical Interpretive Inquiry: A Qualitative Study of Five Contemporary Artists’ Ways of Seeing,” *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research*, vol. 37, no. 4, 1996, p. 219.

5. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, mit Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2001, p. 95–96.

In this book, and arguably in Oursler’s career as a whole, the central arena for the artist’s ceaseless relay between flatness and depth, surface and overlay, metaphor and hallucination, projection and introversion, even art and science, is the face itself. For the last 30 years Oursler has produced a remarkable assemblage of facial representations, a composite faciality, in effect, that includes the cutout and sculptural objects and personae (of the early sets); the projection of facial close-ups and facial part-objects (eyes, mouths, noses etc.) onto recipient effigies, dummies, and other surfaces and volumes, beginning in the later 1980s; and, more recently, augmented photographic representations of his own face and of re-embedded facial items organized into a series of pseudo-physiognomies. His reinvention of the territories and signification of the face also includes special projects which have fractured and multiplied its parts, such as the exhibition *Eyes* (1999), in which the gallery space was made over into a planetarium of suspended, desocketed eye-balls to create an eerie cosmology of disembodied gazes and shifting blinks.

Ranging, iconographically, from skulls, devil’s-heads, and blob-faces, to automata, painted faces, machinic visages, and acephalic personae, the paintings, drawings, collages, and other works collected here offer a kind of summation and commentary on Oursler’s signature dispersal of facial signification. Among American artists who came of age in an era once described as “postmodern,” in the 1970s and 80s this interest is not unique to Oursler, of course. But his physiognomic commitments and facial obsessions are quite different in origin, conception, and materialization from the predominantly photographic images through which the modernist occlusion of physiognomic referentiality was challenged in these years. Defined by new relations to the reinvention of structures, the emptying out of the subject, and various challenges to the iconicity of the human body, the postmodern moment witnessed an astonishing sequence of reversions to somatic and facial articulation. These included Warhol’s silk-screened “society icons” and later skulls; Barbara Kruger’s opaquely refracted gender-heads; Lucas Samaras’ series of *Photo-Transformations*; Nancy Bursen’s computer generated photographic composites (e.g. *Warhead 1*, 1982; 55% Reagan, 45% Brezhnev, less than 1% Thatcher, Mitterand, Deng); and an array of new questions posed to the construction of facialized ethnicities—by Lorna Simpson (e.g. *Guarded Conditions*, 1989); Adrian Piper (e.g. *Vanilla Nightmares*, 1987); Jimmie Durham (e.g. *Self-portrait*, 1987), and others. Many



Tony Oursler
Let’s Switch, 1996

Barabara Kruger
Untitled (You Are Not Yourself), 1982

of these practices of re-facialization are worked out in complex relation to the histories of facial expression and the pseudo-science of physiognomy. Burson's computer-generated portrait composites, for example, engage with the history of photographic composites, dating back to the pioneer of eugenics, Francis Galton, to 19th-century ethnological research on racial differences and criminality, as well as to subsequent experiments with the photographic composite by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy in the 1930s and William Wegman in the 1970s.[6]

6. For a preliminary formulation of these issues, see John C. Welchman, "Face(t)s: Notes on Faciality," *Artforum*, November, 1988; and John C. Welchman, "Until the Probe-head," in *Faciality*, exh. cat., Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, July/August 1994.

Oursler's concerns are not quite so genealogical, but no less historical. They have what appears to be quite a finite point of origin in the crucial convergence of facial signification with the new technologies of reproduction, narrative, and information represented by the advent and maturity first of broadcast television and then of portable video apparatuses. In the inaugural epoch of television, which extended through Oursler's childhood and adolescence, the telepresencing of bodies and faces represented a triumph for the hallucinatory intensity of the corporeal, but at the same time—by virtue of the diminutions of scale and blur of detail associated with early and second generation TV—delivered a shock to communal expectations of the palpability of the somatic forms embodied in moving images already secured in the late 1950s and 60s by the scope and resolution of film.

Beginning in his earliest projects, Oursler turned his attention to the implications and effects of the social dissemination of flatness that was the pair and consequence of the technological, imagistic, and narrative reductions of TV. As we have seen, it is across these dimensions that the artist draws the permeable boundaries for the exchange between media forms and appearance that is one of his most notable contributions. Drawing is not, therefore, one generic choice among several media opportunities, but an active term connoting a process of comparative making. Duchamp caught some of the semantic and material shifts for which I am reaching here when he noted his enigmatic commitment to "drawing on chance."[7]

Driven on by the wider implications of drawing out, Oursler's preoccupation with faces is funded by a series of general questions about the relation between bodies, representation, and social formation, as well as by more specific concerns precipitated by the apparatus and cultural engineering of TV itself. I want to begin with these speculative questions, before turning back to the focal points of Oursler's interest in the face, which connect it to the theory and practice of media. One of the largest issues before us turns on the constitution of facial realism, and the differences caught between faces apprehended through familial and social encounters and the faces met within representation. The divide between these domains has long been subject to critical and philosophic speculation; though it has also been reduced and not occasionally trivialized by unreflexive assumptions of continuity. As Susan Sontag noted in her discussion of photography, one of the key moments in this debate arrived when Ludwig Wittgenstein turned his signature skepticism to the assumptions underwriting the mimetic capacities of the face in reproduction: " … we *regard* the photograph, the picture on our wall," he wrote, "as the object itself (the man, the landscape, and so on) depicted there. This need not have been so. We could easily imagine people who did not have this relation to such pictures. Who, for example, would be repelled by photographs, because a face without colour and perhaps even a face in reduced proportions struck them as inhuman."[8] What Wittgenstein attacks here is the apparently remorseless capacity of mimetic theories of representation to elide the manifest differences between person (or place) and image. The philosopher's apparently calm and understated inference, arising from the hypothetical readings of a class of counter-mimetic viewers, turns the humanistic assumptions embedded in the mimetic reading of images literally upside down; so that an image of this or that face

7. In a letter to Francis Picabia written from the Café de Paris in Monte Carlo in 1924, Duchamp emphasizes the mechanical, repetitive character of the work that informed *Obligations pour la Roulette de Monte-Carlo* or *Monte Carlo Bond* (1924), its "delicious monotony without the least emotion." His effort is a kind of geometric abstraction, worked out between "the red and the black figure," in which, as he so curiously puts it, he is "sketching [or, in other translations, 'drawing'] on chance"; *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, Da Capo, New York 1973, p. 187.

8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, cited in Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1979, p. 198.

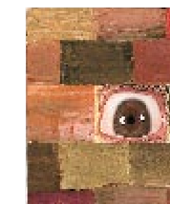
or person is less a "likeness" or version of a embodied original, but instead a potentially monstrous defection from it characterized above all by its "inhumanity." Oursler has been continuously interested in a creative re-making and re-reading of faces staged at the thresholds of received systems of codification and interpretation; and has frequently used the upside model of the camera obscura as a figure for the media inversions investigated in his work. It is not surprising then, as we will see, that he takes up with the critical space between the "this need not have been so" of representation and its deviant or counter-human implications.

The broadly-based iconoclastic skepticism of Wittgenstein raises a related, but more discursively targeted, question about the relation of faces to the class or type of representation formalized, first by artists, then by art historians, over the last half millennium as "portraiture." But while never forgetting the generic implications of historical portrait models, Oursler is clearly more interested in what lies on the other side of their formalized encodings of specific persons and social types. Many of his faces, including several in this book, are sited on the very threshold of identification *as faces*. They emerge from the representation and permutation of certain basic semaphoric units of facial order, schematic minima that engender the projected—or conjectured—presence of facial volume accompanied by intimations of the key facial part-objects (eye, nose, mouth). This process is aligned on an axis of signification that seems to have two extremities, predicated on two versions of our negotiation with the initial recognition and apprehension of faces.

The first of these is configured around flat, diagrammatic reductions of the face, long part of the codified accountancy of physiognomic analysis, but popularized in recent times by the omnipresent "smiley face" and its legacy of lightly inflected emoticons,[9] to which Oursler refers in his writings and which he appropriates in several works—directly, in e.g. *Have a Nice Day* (2006, p. 98), and indirectly in a spectrum of goofy, anime, and doughnut faces (in *Visitation*, 2003, p. 55; and *Untitled*, 2003, p. 55). Probably first developed (though not copyrighted) by David Stern of the eponymous advertising agency in Seattle around 1967, the smiley face simultaneously completes and aborts the abstracting journey of the avant-gardist facial sign commenced by the geometric reductions of the Cubists, emblematized in the paintings of Alexei Jawlensky, and given its most radical inflection in the emotive metaphysics that underwrote Kasimir Malevich's Suprematist works from the later 1910s which he correlated, in theory and physical placement, with that apogee of facial presence and transcendence represented by the icon tradition of the Orthodox church. In the later 1960s, the schematic face is made over as the common coinage of one-dimensional emotivity. Eagerly adopted as a commodity supplement by the merchandizing instincts of post-1960s commercial culture, it was at first rhymed with the popular positivism of the peace and love generation, and then taken up, with avid over-determination, in the techno-corporate emergence of the computer era, where its use has exploded in ubiquitous typographic and text-based permutations, various animated GIF formats, and a myriad other image representations. The face in this condition has, quite literally, been grafted onto social superficiality. All its speculative depth has been foreclosed by a process of almost perverse syntagmatic reallocation as the face becomes a misbegotten *short-hand* for the universalizing complacency of mindless affirmation.

9. Wittgenstein develops an important discussion of the emotive signification of a smiley-type "face primitively drawn" in the *Brown Book*; see *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations". Generally Known as the Blue and Brown Books*, Blackwell, Oxford 1958, p. 162; see also, p. 179f.

The second extreme emerges rather more distractedly in the spaces between facial perception and recognition, where it arises from a compulsion to generate facial signification triggered by certain complex, form-shifting platforms (such as clouds, textured walls, photographic tonalities, etc.) and is activated by our facially denominated projective capacities—part of a psychological disposition termed "pareidolia" in which people see organized, often anthropomorphic, patterns in apparently formless material or "noise."[10] This end of the spectrum of facial projection has


Tony Oursler
Gold Walk, 2005

Alexei Jawlenski
Abstract Head, 1923

been associated with both the conjuring capacities of the imagination (as in the facial configurations alluded to by Aristotle, Pliny, Alberti, and Leonardo da Vinci) and with the apparatuses of myth, legend, and religious and mystical devotion (as in the *volto santo*, the Shroud of Turin, the man in the moon, and numerous face-landscape correlations—including, for example, a recent bid to facialize the surface of the planet Mars, derived from skewed photogrammetrical readings of NASA photographs by the Near Pathfinder Anomaly Analysis group, NPAAG).[11]

10. See Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, Random House, New York 1995, esp. p. 45: "As soon as the infant can see, it recognizes faces, and we now know that this skill is hardwired in our brains. Those infants who a million years ago were unable to recognize a face smiled back less, were less likely to win the hearts of their parents, and less likely to prosper. These days, nearly every infant is quick to identify a human face, and to respond with a goony grin." See also, Stewart Elliott Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993, which interrogates the concept of anthropomorphism in theories and practices of animism, perception, art, philosophy, science, and religion, concluding that it is a determining cognitive strategy for making sense of natural and other contexts and environments.

11. See Michael Kwakkelstein, *Leonardo da Vinci as a Physiognomist: Theory and Drawing Practice*, Primavera Pers, Leiden 1994; and http://www.mufor.org/ares/.

The torrential reinscription of facial presence in and across the natural and cosmological worlds has attracted both enthusiasts and radical skeptics from the ranks of poets and philosophers. Novalis, for example, once noted that, "Anything that is strange, accidental, individual, can become our portal to the universe. A face, a star, a stretch of countryside, an old tree etc., may make an epoch in our inner lives. This is the great reality of fetish worship."[12] In a statement that did much to commend him to the Surrealists and their commentators, Novalis builds here an empire for the subjective self predicated on a constellation of emotively-charged glimpses—of "a face, a star, a stretch of countryside … " In doing so he conjugated the fetishization of the chance encounter with the virtual history (that "inner epoch") of subjective experience. His chosen symbols of this para-time played out in the inner life are coordinated in a Romantic variant of the face-star-landscape system that underwrites the articulation of *faciality* in the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.[13] Obsessed as he was by the metaphysical and everyday conditions of correspondence and the social stakes of similitude—both of which converge in his wider project of "materialist physiognomy"—Walter Benjamin discusses some of the limit-terms (and inevitabilities) in the analogization of faces: "We start with 'similarity.' We then try to obtain clarity about the fact that the resemblances we can perceive, for example, in people's faces, in buildings and plant forms, in certain cloud formations and skin diseases, are nothing more than tiny prospects from a cosmos of similarity."[14]

NASA Photo of Mars/Face

12. Novalis, Neue Fragmente no. 259, cited in Werner Spies, *Max Ernst: Collages: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe*, Abrams, New York 1991, p. 11.

13. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, vol. II, trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1987, chapter 7, "Year Zero: Faciality," p. 167f.

14. Walter Benjamin, "On Astrology," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1913–1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1999, p. 684.

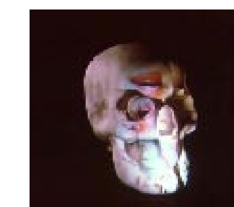
In "Pop Dead Pictures" (2002), Oursler offers his own account of the production of "regenerative portraiture" accompanied by a latter-day parable derived from a contemporary "pilgrimage." Writing of the aftermath of the 9/11 catastrophe, which unfolded close to his own residence and studio in downtown Manhattan, he notes that "almost everyone who made the gruesome pilgrimage wanted to do one thing: take pictures with their cameras. I started shooting the people shooting Ground Zero, studying the way they related to their cameras … People are selling horrific snapshots of the event, and one series of images are marked, 'devil's head.' The peddler explained, 'if you look closely you can see the face of the devil in the red-orange fire ball.'"[15] As Carl Sagan and others have suggested, the extrapolation of facial references from non-sentient configurations might be occasioned by the remnants of a reflex defense mechanism designed to anticipate any form of danger or surveillance. Here, however, the demonic hallucination is predicated on a willful polarization between creeds and ethnicities, emerging as the perverse afterimage of a moral and religious binarism that is already in place in the prejudicial imaginary of the viewer/interpreter. The leering, flickering, red-hot, flame-bound devil's head makes a deviant pair with its would-be benign obverse, the coolly static symmetry and eviscerated emotions of the happy-yellow smiley-head.

15. Tony Oursler, "Pop Dead Pictures," in *Tony Oursler*, exh. cat., Museo d'Arte Contemporaneo Roma (MACRO), Rome 2003, p. 163.

In his own representations, Oursler develops an extended meditation on the postmortem, counter-physiognomy of death in a series of skulls and demons done in acrylic on paper and other media. In *Slang* (2000), a skull is flecked with butterflies as if the worms of decay which devoured the flesh have blossomed into pluralized rounds of colorfully transient life. *Crystalizeding* (2002) offers the skull without entomological supplementation as a garishly translucent phantom, a cranial mass haunted by what had formerly possessed it, appearing like an X-ray of what is already interiorized and skeletal. In earlier works developed around the death's head, Oursler produced literalizations of diabolic personae, such as the *White Devil*, *Devil's Head with Green Light*, and *Devil and Angel* constituents of his *Optics* exhibition at MassMOCA (1999); or staked out alliances with his central thematic concerns, as in *Early Cinematic Device in Red* (1997), which couples the mortuary form of the skull with the cinematic apparatus and its effects.

Elsewhere, the image of the head is caught somewhere in the middle of its dreadful journey toward death and decay (as in the craggy, misfit face of *Kill or Be*, 1997). In the exhibition *Still Lives and Skulls* at Metro Pictures in New York in 1998, Oursler created perhaps his most notable and ghoulish array of skull-like forms: in *Poetry* (1998) the skull is a projection screen for a heart-shaped tombstone; in *Feedback* (1998) it inflects and absorbs a slab-like grid of text that overflows onto the wall behind it. Other skulls spill dime-store jewelry from their eye and nasal sockets, or, as in *Fear* (1998), are beset by garlands of chains and garish paint-pours. The skull in *Flame* (1998) becomes a candle-bearing altar, while in *Ghost Bell* (1998) a hulking, whitish skull is impacted by the bullet-like projection of lips and teeth on its boney forehead. *Crystal Skull*, also shown at the Manchester Art Gallery in 2003, takes the form of a huge fiberglass skull flashing out both colors and hypnotic discourse on blind spots and floaters. And *Hole*, shown at THE LAB in San Francisco in February 2001, features a large skull with a video projection of a moving mouth.

That Oursler relates his own development of the skull and death's head motifs to historical conceptualizations of death is attested by clear references to the tradition of the memento mori, and by his elision of these allusions in *Composite Still Life* (1999), with its playful re-examination of the compound skulls of Salvador Dalí such as *The Face Of War* (1940), or Philippe Halsman's photograph, *In voluptas mors* (1951), which features the artist and a life-skull assembled from seven naked female bodies. Oursler's skulls take on more than the mannered endgame of the vanitas tradition, however. Considered as a congregation of spent or rotten heads, this defleshed body of work is an allegory of the morbid conditions of mediated experience itself and of the exhaustion and capitulation of the artist's situational psychodramas. They shuttle us across Oursler's river Styx of negative becoming, carrying us over to a nether world of disembodied demonological diminishment where we are virtually re-constituted by our fears, prejudices, and nightmares. Oursler thus stakes out a crucial third position between two key mortuary visions in recent art. The first of these is set out in Warhol's series of skulls (1976–1977) and self-portraits, which figure an intimation of mortality haunted on one side by the fading-unto-death of celebrity and on the other by what Hal Foster described as the social unconscious of *Death in America*.[16] The second is ventured by Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God*, a re-dentured 18th-century human skull encrusted with some 8,600 diamonds and valued at $100 million, which raises death as expenditure to a flash point of aesthetically-inflected commercial obscenity.[17]



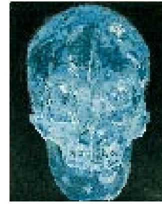
Tony Oursler
Composite Still Life, 1999

Philippe Halsman
In voluptas mors, 1951

16. On Wahol's skulls see Trevor Fairbrother, "Skulls," in *The Work of Andy Warhol*, ed. Gary Garrels, Bay Press, Seattle 1989; and Hal Foster, "Death in America," *October*, vol. 75, Winter, 1996, p. 36–59.

For Oursler, however, death and its heads are not the great levelers of the rich and famous or nightmares of popular misfortune, nor again, as with Hirst, gathered up in an über-vanitas that summarizes and fulfills the art world's teleological drive for value. Instead, Oursler has excavated in his skulls for another sequence of relations in which they become chambers for the generation of images as well as motifs in the iconography of passing. Building on the cavernous, engorged eyes assembled for a show in 1996 that acted as spherical housings for image production, some of the skulls in the 1998 exhibition also do double duty as representational machines—an association that is followed-up in several of the drawings—as their hollowed-out heads are converted into camera obscura-like spaces brimming with incipient imagery. In conversation with Elizabeth Janus, Oursler underlines this reference: "It seemed to me at this point that the skull was only one step away from the camera obscura: a dark chamber with light streaming through an opening—the empty eye socket—into the lost sea of consciousness."[18] Something similar is attempted by Marcos Novak in his *AlloBrain@AlloSphere*, a project in which scans of Novak's brain become reflexive agents for the generation of spatial environments. By transforming void into mass he is able to "inhabit" his own brain or extrapolate particular sections of it as architectural models. Oursler works with a variant of this delicious conceit, converting the dead head into a cinema of fantasies by reinvesting it with imagistic thoughts taken from a prior life. By opening up his skulls from the inside and contouring them with projection he converts them into mediumistic resurrections, exhuming images culled from long nights of the living dead.[19]

17. See, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6712015.stm. On Oursler's dialogue with the skull, see Ian MacMillan, "Expressway to Your Skull," *Modern Painters*, Spring 1998, p. 77–79.



Tony Oursler
Crystalizeding, 2002

Andy Warhol
Skull, **1976**

18. Tony Oursler in Elizabeth Janus, "Talking Back: A Conversation with Tony Oursler"; http://www.tonyoursler.com/tonyourslerv2/words/interviews/elizabethjanus.htm.

Posed in the semantic space between the death's head and the knowable social subject are a range of faces that attach to inanimate dolls, automata, and hybrid personae, such as *Bad Doll* (2001, p. 24), which images a scowling, curly-haired, dark-skinned, racially ambiguous female doll posed frontally, while a smiling, cherubic-cheeked, disembodied male head appears over its shoulder; works that feature acephalic figures such as the headless female in *Neg Leg* (2003, p. 57); and others that take on the scrambling, rescaling, and reorientation of body—but especially facial—parts, as again in *Neg Leg* with its monocular eye, embedded in an ear-like protrusion that is itself cut-off from any sustaining corporeality, or *Untitled* (2003) which images two homunculus-like busts outcropping from an eye and the nose of a schematic circular face. In *Blox Flox* (2003) we encounter a trio of enlarged eyes hovering in Cubist-like facets over a bearded male death mask; and in *Twiced* (2004) two eyes, one encased in a boulder-like mass, the other set in a burr-edged balloon-shaped field, return to Oursler's concern with the physiognomic signification of the eye, the guarantees it offers of one of the semantic minima required for the identification of a "face," and its capacities to follow, surveil, or watch the viewer back. The plurality of these faces stands in for the heterogeneity of the faces encountered in everyday and mediated life, from random faces on the streets to TV talking heads; from facial surrogates, such as those atop dolls or mannequins, to the wider morphology of face-like shapes and facial parts in blobs, balloons, and balls.

19. On Marcos Novak's *AlloBrain@AlloSphere*, see http://www.mat.ucsb.edu/allosphere/.

For Oursler, however, there is one location for the redistribution of facial signification between the extremes of death and social vivacity that takes center stage in his work as a whole, and in particular in his drawings. This is a scene in which faces in their various conditions and appearances, some as described above, are posed with or superimposed upon a "ground" made up of machinery or technological instruments or apparatuses. *Horror Harmonies* (2000, p. 11), for example, stands at the intersection between Oursler's interest in the apparatuses of recording, transmission, and construction, and the signifying proclivities of the human head. Floating in a field of antennae, the face represented here is a ghoulish hirsute apparition with asymmetrical bug eyes and a lolling tongue, whose iconographical allegiance layers a horror flick hippie over the manic contrivances of medieval demonology (see also *Gothic (sic)*, p. 17). In some works the enmeshment between face and machine is confrontational, as in the "tortured" yet somehow comedic figure-of-eight face in *No Yes Yes* (2003), which is literally pierced by the apparatus around it. *Chine* (2003, p. 58), also images a female head embedded in mechanical elements, this time with her eyes patched by ovals bearing diagrammatic enlargements of anime eyeballs; while in *Unkie* (2002–2003, p. 61), the profile of a friend on a methadone high—with stubbly chin, open mouth, and closed eyes—stares across at a corner bracing made of girders and beams separated by a reddish, dripping, paint splash, with a teddy bear below.

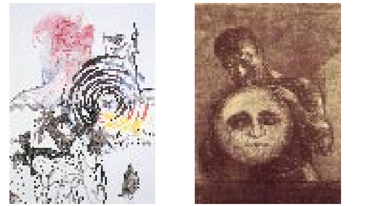
The importance of this defining relationship between head and machine is both recognized and underlined by artist. "The Antennas," he wrote, "needed faces but they had to be wandering in their own atmosphere, lost in the ether, unstable. Moving lights were used while shooting to emphasize the shapes and dimensions of the faces, like the way a person looks in a car driving at night. The faces are constantly being formed visually: chiaroscuro in waves of light. Then I needed the faces to move in a mechanical slide or loop, like a TV rolling. This was done with computer animation; they bend and distort as they travel over the surface of the sculpture. There is a lot of power, tension in the juxtaposition of the three kinds of movement: human, light, and mechanical."[20] On this account, the soft circu-larity and caricatural plasticity of faces answered the need of the aerials and antennae omnipresent in Oursler's work for a pseudo-corporeality defined by morphological indeterminacy, ceaseless movement, and luminous dissolution.

20. Oursler, "Pop Dead Pictures," p. 159.

Oursler elides the face in its condition as an entropic, floating sign with technological and ethereal iconography in a manner that looks back to, but finally turns away from, the physiognomic declensions of the historical avant-garde. I want briefly to consider three moments in this engagement. In the *noirs* of Odilon Redon, first of all, the face is promiscuously allied to a startling range of biomorphic shapes including planets, the nimbus, auras, the portrait oval and cellular forms—as well as to monsters and hybrids, such as Cyclops and demons, and technological objects, including the hot-air balloon (*Eye Balloon*, 1878). Oursler, in fact, shares many of Redon's interests and obsessions: his magnification, engorgement, and distortion of the facial envelope and its features; a fascination with the enucleated eye and the correspondence between face, plants, and landscapes (Redon's *Strange Flower (Little Sister of the Poor)*, 1880, *Little Flowers (Human Heads)*, 1880, or *Marsh Flower*, 1882; Oursler's tree-face from *The Influence Machine*, 2000–2002, p. 144). Both took on the facialized power of nightmares and visions (Redon in *Nightmare*, 1881; Oursler in *Dream Test*, 2001); and both investigated monstrous, bestial, and demonic physiognomies (see Redon's *Devil*, *Satyr*, and *Black Angel*, all 1877; and Oursler's *Confusion F/X*, 2000). But there are further striking alignments between the two artists. Both establish satirical but compulsive dialogues with contemporary science, Redon with evolution and electricity, Oursler with the history and reception of imaging technologies and their apparatuses. Both are equally compelled by the genres of horror, science fiction, and ghost stories—Redon looking to Edgar Allen Poe (to whom he dedicated his second lithographic album in 1881) and to the "tenderly melancholic" monstrosities of his own short fiction (such as "The Story of Mad Marthe," c. 1878),[21] Oursler responding to Hitchcock, B-movies, and UFOlogy. What changes in the century between Redon and Oursler, between the threshold of the era of mass technological consumerism and its triumphalist, globalizing heyday, arises of course from social shifts

Tony Oursler
The Influence Machine, 2000–2002

Odilon Redon
Strange Flower, 1880



Tony Oursler
Confusion F/X, 2000

Odilon Redon
Devil, 1877

in the transmissive scenes of these images from the Symbolist era to the MTV and new media generations, from the allures of counter-Positivist fantasy to the haunting of everyday life by media spectacle received as repetition and multiplicity.

A second moment of convergence and separation is offered by Francis Picabia, who overlaid machines, faces, and various attributes of identity in quizzical, title-charged, text-bearing couplets in his famous series of "machine-portraits" made between 1915 and 1918, five of which appear in the journal *291* no. 5/6, 1915 (*Ici c'est Steiglitz foi et amour*, *Le Saint des Saints*, *De Zayas! De Zayas!*, *Voila Haviland*, and *Portrait d'une jeune fille américaine dans l'état de nudité* [*Portrait of a Young American Girl in the State of Nudity*]). Picabia correlated his mechanophilia with his experience of American technological modernity, writing in the same year that, "the genius of the modern world is machinery, and … through machinery art ought to find a most vivid expression." "The machine," he continued, "has become more than a mere adjunct of human life. It is really part of human life—perhaps its very soul."[22] Picabia's deployment of the machinic reference was, however, seldom straightforward or explicit. He used it instead as a pervasive metaphorical delivery system for concerns that were, by turns, satirical, erotic, misogynistic, automotive, primitivizing, and self-consciously absurdist. In *Poems and Drawings of the Daughter Born Without a Mother*, for example, the machine makes appearances as a pretext for humor ("witticism machines"), absurdity or dysfunction ("pointless machine"), amorousness ("current views in love machine"), which are set off by references to "gear chang[ing]," "electric light globes," and "wireless telegraphy."[23] In the preface to *Thoughts without Language* he simultaneously supercharges and obfuscates the tropic potential of modern machines by crossing the on/off binarism of the switches which activate them with the interior vision of the X-ray: "This book is the radiograph of the radiation best showing the veiled clarity of the substances called for by the closed switch."[24]

Oursler too creates dissident compounds for machinery and technological devices with the portraiture genre and questions of identity. While his own self-portraits and the paint-smeared faces of studio assistants and colleagues are associated more with the kind of radical pictorialist cosmetics adopted by the Russian Futurists[25] than the machine-oriented pseudo-personae of Picabia, his personal acquaintances make occasional appearances, as with the drug-afflicted profile in *Unkie* (2002–2003, p. 61). But Oursler's variant of the machine-portrait is played out in reference less to his own avant-garde circle than in dialogue with historical protagonists who have played decisive or eccentric roles (often simultaneously) in the development of image and media devices, including many that were unrealized or never entered into commercial production.

Kircher's Actor (2000, p. 16) pays homage to Athanasius Kircher, a 17th-century German Jesuit scholar who authored some 40 works in Latin on a heterogeneous range of subjects including oriental studies, geology, medicine, Egyptology, and music theory. Kirchner was well known for his research-based trans-disciplinary speculations. In *Magnes*, ostensibly a discussion of magnetism, for example, he also discoursed on other forms of attraction such as gravity and love. Oursler is interested in a special instance of these

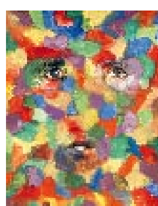
21. On "Le récit de Marthe la folle" [translated here as "The Account of Mad Merthe"] see Douglas W. Druick and Peter Kort Zegers, "Taking Wing, 1870–1878," in *Odilon Redon: Prince of Dreams, 1840–1916*, exh. cat., The Art Institute of Chicago/Abrams, Chicago/New York 1994, p. 103–104.

22. Francis Picabia, cited in Rudolf E. Kuenzli (ed.), *New York Dada*, Willis, Locker and Owens, New York 1986, p. 131.

23. Francis Picabia, *I Am a Beautiful Monster: Poetry, Prose, and Provocation*, trans. Marc Lowenthal, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2007, p. 60.

24. Francis Picabia, "Preface [signed "Udine"] to *Thoughts without Language*," in ibid., p. 153. Linda Dalrymple Henderson notes that X-rays were seen as "a scientific confirmation of clairvoyant vision," "Francis Picabia, Radiometers, and X-Rays in 1913," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 71, no. 1, March 1989, p. 118.

25. On the painted faces of the Russian Futurists, see Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2003, p. 93–95; Ilya Zdanevich and Mikhail Larionov, "Why we paint ourselves: A Futurist Manifesto, 1913," in John E. Bowlt (ed. and trans.), *Russian art of the avant-garde: Theory and criticism 1902–1934*, Viking, New York 1976, p. 79–83; and John E. Bowlt, "Faces Painted with Fanciful Patterns," in *Literature and the Arts of the 20th Century: USSR (Avant Garde: Interdisciplinary and International Review, 5/6, 1991)*, ed. Jan van der Eng and Willem G. Weststeijn Rodopi, Amsterdam and Atlanta, Georgia 1991.


Tony Oursler
Colost, 2004

Larionov/Goncharova
Drama In Cabaret 13, 1914

extrapolative scenes which aligns Kirchner's representation of the camera obscura (one of the first) with the moral binarism of good and evil—the latter represented by a half-effaced horned devil to the left, whose image is inverted in one of the chambers; the former by a scaled rank of real and up-side-down crosses. *Tracer* (2001–2002, p. 20) presents us with a black and white outline image of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), whose discovery of what he termed *magnétisme animal* (animal magnetism or "mesmerism") led to the development by James Braid (1795–1860) of hypnosis in 1842. Mesmer is shown seated in a chair, tethered by his ears and feet to a machine, perhaps a version of the "baquet" described in historical accounts of mesmeric sessions, on a table behind him. For Oursler this is a scene of phantom concentration presided over by an improbable apparatus and best by obscure numerology, painterly force fields, and snake-like, animal-headed, auratic emanations. Long compelled by the fault lines between subjective states and the machines that induce and record them, Oursler's Mesmer is an emblem of those speculative conjunctions of occult practice and pseudo-science which might bear witness through the willful persistence of their instruments, measurements, or assumptions to salient innovations in technological selfhood. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the grisaille swirls and unspecific protuberances of *Mediumud* (2001, p. 9), with its tripod-mounted camera, two crew, and video-subject, we encounter a similar register of contextual ambiguity and haunted mediation.

The installation with projection, *Box* (1997), turns on another relay between technology and its historical progenitors. The left wall of this open structure features a photomontage of John Logie Baird (1888–1946), the Scottish engineer who is credited with the invention of the electro-mechanical television, which he called a "televisor." Surrounded by the numerous lightbulbs needed for his experiments, Baird appears in the company of a ventriloquist's dummy nicknamed "Stooky Bill," who was the subject of the first television picture produced with halftones in a 30-line vertically scanned image at five pictures a second in October 1925. Oursler's focus on the dummy reappears in several works including *Psycho Satellite* (2002), featuring Harry Kellar's (1849–1922) automaton "Psycho," a version of John Nevil Maskelyne's (1839–1917) original card-playing robot, and another drawing that pairs Baird and Stooky Bill, *Baird vs Future* (2004, p. 56). It points to both the happenstance correlation of invention with amateur diversions,[26] and to another of the abiding interests of the historical avant-garde in the era of Picabia, which produced what amounted to a fixation on mannequins, dolls, and dummies, from the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, to Surrealist and modernist German photography, and the sculptural objects of Hans Bellmer.[27] Like Picabia, too, Oursler injects the installation with a dose of sexual prurience by fixing stretched female garments to the wall opposite the Logie Baird photograph; while the space between them is hung with a shower curtain in a gesture that recalls Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960).

Fairy Man (2001, p. 21) and *Tune Mort* (2003, p. 49) furnish two final examples of Oursler's machine-assisted quasi-portraits. Traced from a projected photograph, *Tune Mort* represents the Latvian-born psychologist Konstantin Raudive (1909–1974) at work on one of his recording devices; while *Fairy Man* shows a close-up from the same source of Raudive's disembodied hands, set in a box at the top right. A data-specific globe and various red-hued birds and fairy figures appear below. Known for the some 72,000 "spirit voices" he tape-recorded during his Electronic Voice Phenomenon (EVP) research, known in English as "Breakthrough," Raudive's experiments provide Oursler with a sonic inflection of

26. Another example of the plurality of the inventive mind is furnished by Maskelyne himself, who, in addition to his work as an English stage magician, invented a lock for London toilets which required a penny to operate, hence the euphemism "spend a penny"; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Nevil_Maskelyne.

27. For discussion of the interest in mannequins, dolls, and automata and its relation to Freud's concept of the uncanny, see Mike Kelley, "Playing with Dead Things," and John C. Welchman, "The Uncanny and Visual Culture," in *The Uncanny*, exh. cat., Tate Liverpool, Liverpool 2004; exhibition curated by Mike Kelley. Tony Conrad discusses Oursler's relation to the tradition of the ventriloquist's dummy inaugurated in the mid-18th century in his essay, "Who Will Give Answer to the Call of my Voice: Sound in the Work of Tony Oursler," in *Tony Oursler*, ed. Elizabeth Janus and Gloria Moure, Ediciones Poligrafa, Barcelona 2001, p. 150–166.

Tony Oursler
Untitled, 2003

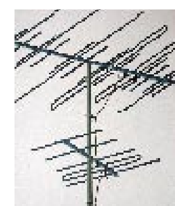
Mike Kelley
Cry Baby (from *Monkey Island*), 1993

the machine-assisted channeling and precipitation of invisible forms manifested in waves or frequencies. Like Tristan Tzara, who once referred to "the banditry of the gramophone, the little anti-human mirage that I like in myself,"[28] Oursler seizes on Raudive's obsessive archivalism as another way station in his ironic cosmos of appropriating, mediumistic machines, setting it alongside a speculative fairyscape presided over by his imagistic equivalent of Tzara's "world tottering in its flight, linked to the resounding tinkle of the infernal gamut."[29]

28. Trsitan Tzara, "MONSIEUR AA THE ANTIPHILOSOPHER SENDS US THIS MANIFESTO," in *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, Calder, London 1977.

The governing apparatus in Oursler's technological firmament is the antenna or aerial, the privileged object that receives and decodes transmissions or signals, such as those produced or intercepted by Baird and Raudive, and to which, as I noted above, Oursler attributes a determining "need" for "faces." Presiding over some dozen works collected here, it appears as a solitary icon in *Untitled* (2001), and *Anti* (2002, p. 8); as transmission lines and their supporting structures in *Power Pole* (2002, p. 14); as a background grid or motif in *Visitation* (2003, p. 55), *Transformeds* (2003), and *Horror Harmonies* (2000, p. 11), which reproduces the demonically possessed girl from *The Exorcist* (1973, dir. William Friedkin). Almost inevitably, Oursler is also drawn to the visual appearances of the signals themselves, whether as auras and emanations, in *Confusion F/X* and *Tracer*; ciphers for the shapes of the invisible in *What You Can't See (B/W)* (2000, p. 22), and *What You Can't See (In Color)* (2000, p. 22); or patterns, test-screens, and other formal notations as in *Pokémon Photic Seizures* (1998, p. 23), *Pickup* (2002, p. 19), *Nordic Test* (2002, p. 51), and *Untitled* (2003), in which the artist poses a transvestite Cyclops and female adolescent head with a scrambled version of a color chart based on thermal imaging. *Freqlot 2* (2002, p. 53) and *Frequency Spectrum* (2002, p. 52), another three-dimensional structure, are both defined by variants of the frequency spectrum charts that Oursler researched in Scandinavia for the exhibition *Station* (Magasin 3, Stockholm, 2002) while working with a TV station and its already outmoded 1980s-era equipment, which he purchased in order to experiment with obsolescence and feedback.

29. Tristan Tzara, "Dada Manifesto 1918," in *ibid*.



Tony Oursler
Untitled, 2001

Suzanne Duchamp
Radiation de deux seuls éloignés, 1916–1920

While Picabia himself doesn't appear to have used the iconography of the antenna in his machine-based works, Suzanne Duchamp expanded on her brother's interest in the relation between wireless communication and erotic desire in *Radiation de deux seuls éloignés (Radiation of Two Lone Ones at a Distance)* (1916–1920). According to Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "The upper form resembles a cage-type emitting antenna and the lower gridded one implies a surface on which the 'radiations' are to be recorded." The "theme," she suggests, "seems to echo that of the *Large Glass*: here an antenna-like 'Bride' (Suzanne herself?) projects her message."[30] Revealing a probable source for *Radiation*, Henderson reproduces alongside it a contemporary example of the cage-type antenna from Henri Poincaré and Frederick Vreeland's *Maxwell's Theory and Wireless Telegraphy*.[31] The frank sexualization of machines by the Dada artists, whether analogized by Picabia's spark plug, the chocolate grinder of Marcel Duchamp, or the antenna-like bride of Suzanne, has given way in Oursler's epoch to a media-driven regimen of sexual dysfunction, infantalization, and bathos. Oursler's commentary on this diminuendo of the erotic is, typically, both comic (in the manner of what Duchamp termed "playful physics")[32] and satirical. In *Handsome* (2003, p. 53), for example, a rank of five leering, high-color, mask-like faces, some with moustaches, others with demonic horns, float in front of a monochromatic environment that might be an early TV studio with its boxy cameras, small, blurry screens, and formally

30. Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "Wireless Telegraphy, Telepathy, and Radio Control in the Large Glass," in *Duchamp in Context: Science and Technology in the Large Glass and Related Works*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1998, p. 112.

31. Henri Poincaré and Frederick Vreeland, *Maxwell's Theory and Wireless Telegraphy*, New York, 1904, p. 142.

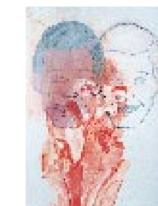
32. *Salt Seller: The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand du Sel)*, eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, Thames and Hudson, London 1975, p. 49.

attired audience. Filtered through the mid-20th-century diminishment of the erotic into dress-codes and appearance driven on by the American media machine, the faces offer a choric commentary on the emergence of a knowingly impossible lust—by turns disembodied and devilish—that emerges from the dusty protocols of the "handsome" Hollywood movie star or the trustworthy TV talking head.

My third point of reference for Oursler's compound of face and machine is provided by Fernand Léger who painted several works during the mid and later 1920s in which the face stares passively, often in old-order, classical profile, into the competition of mechanical forms, elements, and man-made shapes that crowd out the modern environment. *Composition avec profil* (1926), for example, images a head in raking three-quarters profile, sliced off between the forehead and the chin, which appears to the left of the composition as an assemblage of five shaded areas (a tiny neck, an undulating cheek and forehead, a wedge-like nose, and two scrolls representing the hair). This abstracted physiognomy is juxtaposed directly against eight stenciled notations, including a zero and a minus sign (possibly seen in reverse through the glass of a door or window) and a group of other elements, including what appears to be a part of a mirror and five blinds. Mirroring, reversal, and the now-you-see-it-now-you-don't binarism of the blinds, all contribute—both literally and conceptually—to Léger's switch-like visual rhetoric that constantly shuttles between alternatives: of recognition, abstraction, and doubling.[33]

Oursler responds to the new formal complexities of overlay and exchange between the urban environment, its infrastructure, and the machines that punctuate it granted by Léger's post-Cubist compositions. Like Léger, he is especially interested in the arrangement and coordination of objects, including faces, by flatness and contour. The prevalence of circular objects in Léger's images, whether motifs like the bagels or biscuits and upturned hats that surround another face in hard profile in *Composition à la main et aux chapeaux* (1927), or the spots, dots, bolt-heads, and wheels that punctuate both this work (one is even included on the cheek of the face) and many others of the period, reinforces the central tenet of the artist's equalized distribution among objects. No matter whether the circle relates to a zero, a rivet, a porthole, an apple, or a face, he insists, the shape signifies as a specific object locked into a formal arrangement within which its emotive signification, prompted by any form of identification that is not literal or presentational, is muted or irrelevant. Oursler, too, takes up with the circular motif, but unlike Léger, for whom the face is often a classicizing throwback seen in the flatness of a *profile*, it is the face itself apprehended in simplified, caricatural, or popular cultural forms—whether a smiley face, an anime disk, or a blob-head—that inhabits his graphic circularity. The circle of the face becomes an allegory for its self-referring circuitry and the switch-system of media simulations that turns it on and off.

33. This discussion of Léger draws on my essay "Faces, Mask, Profile: From Affect to Object in the Work of Henri Matisse and Fernand Léger," in *Contemporary French Civilization*, special issue on "Visual Culture," eds. Michael Garval and Andrea Goulet, Summer/Fall 2004, vol. XXVIII, no. 2. p. 176–191.



Tony Oursler
Untitled, 1999

Fernand Léger
Nature morte (Les clés), 1928

We are now in a better position to understand the enduring correlation in Oursler's work between flatness, faces, and a wide range of contemporary technological conditions: the protocols of video and the constitution of the TV broadcasting apparatus; and the interfaces among TV and its audiences, and the psycho-social conditions of viewership. "The viewer," he writes in "Phototropic" (1990), "sits as a nullity, hypnotized by the light and synced to the electromagnetic waves of the Utility of Television … While under the influence of the Utility, the viewer manifests one of the predominate signs of schizophrenia: the inability to identify the perimeters of the body or to perceive the point at which the body ends and the rest of the world begins."[34] Viewing bodies surrender themselves under the dull aura of TV. They become unending surfaces whose corporeality is defeated by their mesmeric

34. Tony Oursler, "Phototropic," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, Aperture, New York 1990, p. 489.

stupefaction. The knobbly surfaces of the couch potato are reduced to apparitions of their own peel, a spiral of thinness that seems to have no termination. As ever, Oursler's observations are not staged as straightforward social critique, and his targets are not primarily framed by the content level of commercial culture—whether advertisements or gender constructions. Rather, he takes up with pseudo-narratives that are themselves organized by some of the generic inflections of TV and celluloid culture. What results is a kind of sci-fi or horror-flick vision of the viewer's relation to the centripetal forces of the screen. This is, at the same time, a ghost story as "symbolic species identification is evoked within the viewer … to induce the out-of-body experience."[35] The figure governing all this is not, therefore, an embodied spectator, but a being whose input/output system has been recoded as a surrogate under the dispensation of "Electronic Animism."

35. Ibid.

Perhaps the key focal point in the distribution system of social flatness administered by TV is the actor, a subject position to which Oursler attends not only in its formalized production conditions, but also as a reference point for considerations of self-performance and historical agency which continue in his recent work. It is not surprising, therefore, that Oursler subjected the characteristics of the onscreen persona who organizes the enfabulation of television to caustic recallibration in the poetic reverie of reductions set out in "Phototropic." Beginning as a mere dot or mote of punctuation, the small black point that stops and apportions the frames of writing, the actor is also "a hole with language coming out of it" and the personification of figural flatness at the front of the TV screen: "Anything in the foreground."[36] It is only by understanding the primacy of these constrictions, Oursler's version of the ultra-flat, that the other dimensions of the surrogacy system on which it depends can be apprehended. The actor as "effigy" is the shaping force for receptions of TV that give the appearance of palpability and variation; he is not a "mirror" but a surrogate for processes of flat reflection; the actor is not a manifestation of "anything that moves" or "any evidence of life," but a sign of the reduction of these alls; the actor is not an agent of "empathy," but an engineer of fleeting, superficial attractions. The actor is Frankenstein, but only as the emblem of a clumsy, mechanized, pseudo-humanity.

36. Ibid.

In a challenging discussion of Oursler's earlier work and his first projection pieces, Tony Conrad and Constance De Jong question the relations they pose between spatial and subjective space and their attendant arbitration between character and stereotype, reality and fantasy. Conrad points to a crucial dichotomy in the early, single-channel videos, such as *EVOL* (1984), between what he termed a "completely elaborate universe of flats and sets in a spatial narrative," on the one hand, and a "sort of verbal and actional universe," on the other.[37] In some sense the video projection pieces complete the uncertain journey of the background prop to the front of the image and then outside it, and one understanding the rhetoric of captivity and imprisonment that emanates from so many of Oursler's rag doll figures can be seen as a response to this continuity, as protagonists once trapped inside a medium are now incarcerated in any number of social or moral dilemmas. Dishing out raillery and "paranoia" (Oursler's term),[38] the limply clothed dummies, their garments hung on sticks or tripods, seem utterly unencumbered by corporeal volume, and incautiously, sometimes churlishly, unaware of its loss. This bodily evacuation is matched by the ghost-like flatness of the participants in Oursler's projects, who are "included" as "hallucinations," as Conrad notes. Oursler's dummies and mannequins, modeled in part on the artist's early fascination for the scarecrow figure, belong to an extended tradition of flat, uninflected emblematizations of human corporeality which includes early modern automata, the masks of James Ensor, the mannequins and tailor's dummies of de Chirico, and several Surrealist photographers and object-makers, and the reduced or abstracted

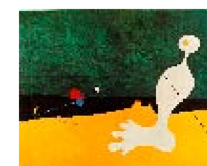
37. "A Conversation Between Constance De Jong and Tony Conrad," in *Tony Oursler: Dummies, Clouds, Organs, Flowers, Watercolors, Videotapes, Alters, Peformances and Dolls*, exh. cat., Portikus, Frankfurt am Main 1995, p. 6.

38. "Oursler has described [his dummies] as 'the most paranoid'"; cited by Friedermann Malsch in "A Kind of Primal Horror: On Dummies, Clothing and the Absence of the Body in the Works of Tony Oursler," in *ibid.*, p. 31.

"personages" of Joan Miró. With this genealogy in mind it is clear that Oursler's work is also linked to the discourse of biomorphic abstraction and its facialized conditions so prevalent in his recent exhibitions, as we will see below.

At the same time, Oursler takes up with another history for the emotive face arising from the legacy of early psychiatric and psychological photography and the alliances they brokered between physiognomy, criminality, and insanity.[39] For Oursler, the face is always an empathy-testing apparatus generated by an engulfing media culture. If the correlation of psychology with facial photography in the later 19th century represents an inaugural moment in this technological journey, its two key way stations are the covert empathetic surrogacy negotiated (or foreclosed) by the dummy and the mannequin, and the emotional exchange system of TV itself. The contemporaneity of the face, in this vision, is constituted by its role as what Oursler terms a "mood machine" or "fantasy extender."[40] The artist's facial manipulations offer a commentary on these exigencies brokered by caricatural distortion and the resultant "noise" of expanded and contracted features; and informed by his longstanding interest in "testing" itself, especially in the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), one of the most frequently used personality tests in mental health, which was first published in 1942, at the beginning of the TV era.

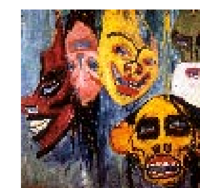
Tony Oursler
Cyc, 2003



Joan Miró
Person Throwing a Stone at a Bird, 1926

39. See, for example, Sander Gilman (ed.), *The Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography*, Brunner/Mazel, New York 1976.

Tony Oursler
Handsome, 2003



Emil Nolde
Masks, 1911

40. Tony Oursler, email to the author, March 17, 2008.

But Oursler's characterological reductionism doesn't stop at the threshold of the type or the cliché. As Conrad and De Jong suggest, Oursler's work is marked by his unstinting capacity to facialize and animate even the most obdurately intangible of non-geometric forms. If, for Conrad, "almost any tawdry bit of fluff can become a protagonist,"[41] De Jong pushes the matter even further toward immateriality, observing that "a character can be a little piece of light that zooms around."[42] While Oursler's protagonists become reduced, even ineffable, both the activity of projection that animates them, and the receiving surface or volume they inhabit, are subject to analogous forms of diminishment. This is nowhere better evidenced than in the series of cloud pieces commenced in 1994, in which suspended masses of synthetic cotton furnish ephemeral and physically dissolute zones for phantasmatic, three-dimensional projections of flatness, giving rise to pseudomorphs that confront the viewer "as a ghost would."[43] Using gestures of ironic presence, Oursler strikes back against the whimsy of that reading of corporeality into clouds and crumbling walls observed by Leonardo and others, substituting media projection for its imaginative variant. The persistence of references—both by Oursler and his critics—to the overlay between animated forms and the regimen of ghosts and ghouls suggests that the spectral has become a delivery system for the haunting of flat form, the very place, in fact, where the blob and the phantom, the sheet and plane, converge. Oursler might have concurred with the young Walter Benjamin, who noted in 1919 that, "In its present state, the social is a manifestation of spectral and demonic powers."[44]

The intersection of impalpability and presence that constitutes this ghosting of form has other sites—and consequences—

Period image of TV in a living room in the 1950s or 1960s

41. "A Conversation Between Constance De Jong and Tony Conrad," p. 6.

42. Ibid.

43. Elizabeth Janus and Paolo Colombo, "Some Notes on recent Work by Tony Oursler," in *Tony Oursler: Dummies, Clouds, Organs, Flowers, Watercolors, Videotapes, Alters, Peformances and Dolls*, p. 22.

44. Walter Benjamin, "World and Time," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1996, p. 227.

however, predicated on the shifting nature of the collisions or mergers, overlays, and transparencies that underwrite it. One location is in the body itself, whose skin or surface envelope is, of course, coupled with an invisible interiority, which Oursler used as another projection platform in his breakthrough work in *Dummies, Clouds, Organs, Flowers, Watercolors, Videotapes, Alters, Peformances and Dolls* in 1994–1995. As "K" puts it in the dialogue that emanates from *Organ Play # 2* (1993), the "organ" is "the place where the outside passes through to the inside."[45] Another site arises from Oursler's persistent suggestion that the metrics of invisible bodies are recoded at the level of the technological by virtue of their resemblance to "the transparency inherent in electronics."[46]

45. Dialogue for *Organ Play # 2* (1993), reprinted in *Tony Oursler: Dummies, Clouds, Organs, Flowers, Watercolors, Videotapes, Alters, Peformances and Dolls*, p. 23.

An extension of the same kind of logic is responsible for another outcome of Oursler's longstanding interest in schematic or diagrammatic heads, from clichés, cutouts, and caricatures, to the ubiquitous smiley face. This is the signal elision by the artist of the TV screen and the lowest common denominator of facial demarcation in the form of the three simple circles or dots in the "negative" and "positive" versions of *The Reflecting Face* (date), Oursler directed his pointed ironization of the pathetic fallacy to geometric forms in a number of pieces, most literally and extensively in *Diamond Head* (1979), in which the leading "characters" are, as the title suggests, simple, diamond shape cutouts which stand in for a stereotypical soap-opera cast. But Oursler's endemic characterological flatness is not simply harnessed to and engendered by the artist's abundant satirical whim. Instead the literal, flat, stick-like characters of Oursler's "Alters" also look over to the simplified, but pluralized, assemblages of selves, with their serially specific attributes, common in clinical Multiple Personality Disorders, alluded to in *Judy* (1994).

46. Malsch, "A Kind of Primal Horror," p. 31.

As these notions of spectral, technical, and somatic flatness accumulate, and as they collide with the man-machine couplet of the TV actor, another key proposition in Oursler's discourse of faciality emerges. For the monstrousness and inhumanity identified by Wittgenstein as the possible consequence of a deficit in mimetic understanding returns in yet another form in the extended sequence of biomorphic facial surrogates that has dominated his recent reckoning with the body. The new iconography is present in the frog-like facial assemblages of bulging eyes and melon-slice mouth in *Transformeds* (2003) and *Over & Out (Blue)* (2003, p. 57), and in drawings where this goofy abbreviation is further truncated, such as *Neg Leg* (2003) and *Untitled* (2003). It is reworked in the eye- and mouth-bearing painted collages made in 2004 (such as *Twiced*, 2004; *Non*, 2004, p. 67; and *Crimsac*, 2004, p. 71); refigured once more in a series of fiberglass panels punctuated by inset miniature monitors (*Ether*, 2006,; *Untitled*, 2006; *Daub*, 2004,; *Digo*, 2004,; *Splotch*, 2004; p. 92–93); and given its most recent inflection in the more complex "paint-splash" configurations from 2007, which are named for their color associations (including *Purple Ideation Exposure*, p. 109; *Invisible Green Ink*, p. 110; *Bluerealisation*; *Red "Love Hurts" Laboratory*, p. 105; *Emanate Orange*; *Pink-too-long*; and *Black in Black out*; etc.).

The journey that gave rise to these series was occasioned not by the artist's engagement with another installment of somatic reduction, but by his attention to the social appearance of the television set. Oursler responded to a generational shift in the ways TV has been lived with, from its obsequious regulation of the familial unit, and virtual absorption as a family member, in the 1950s and 1960s, to its latter day reincarnation as an emblem of surrogate vivacity—something, he suggests, that resembles a kind of "techno-pet."[47] The physiognomy of the TV-techno-pet emerged under the pressure of strategic reductions and allusions based on an imaginary marketing model for a virtual menagerie. As it would speak (of course), with the whispers and informalities of pillow-talk, trading nick-namey stylizations, and as it would see and be seen in doses of looking and blinking, it would have to have eyes (or one at least) and a mouth (or some part of one). But it didn't need to engage in transactions of smell, and so would have no nose. It would need to be seductive, but in an empathetically generalized way, so its formal appearance would conduct its desirability through a trace of the Venus of Willendorf and a hint of the maternal breast-form. It would be therapeutically hi-color and almost glossy in appearance; and it would be self-perpetuating, even embarrassing, in its "behavior." The talking-pet faces that result are precipitations sprung from cyber-space. The response to the "telly" that eventuates from all this is "tubby"—in the sense that it bulges with convivial or mindless abstraction—but remains flat by several other measures, most obviously under the technological dispensation of the flat-screen, but also according to that logic of facialized thinness in which the switch between sense and nonsense, real and virtual, living and dead is cunningly suspended.

47. Tony Oursler, in conversation with the author, February 18, 2008.

These facial compounds act as enframement devices for another round of allusive confusions, as the face becomes an arena for erotic inscription and then a dissident sexual organ. Most apparent in several works from 2003 (such as *Baby)*, its devouring appetites, tactile drives, and morphological promiscuity gather up the sexual energies and appearances of the body it fronts and heads. As we have seen time and again, however, Oursler does not over-commit his free-range similitudes on the model of a visual rhyming couplet—combining face and female breasts and genitalia in the manner of René Magritte's *Le Viol* (1934);[48] or acceding to the still more prurient re-orderings of the Chapman brothers' *Zygotic acceleration, biogenetic de-sublimated libidinal model (enlarged × 100)* (1995), a fused set of manipulated child mannequins whose facial orifices are replaced by genitals, or *Fuck Face* (1994), in which a toddler wearing red sneakers is given a dildo for a nose and a sex-doll orifice mouth. He is interested, instead, in how the face is fed back through the media as a sex machine—the object of a masturbatory fantasy that takes over from those heads detached from bodies given to us as voyeuristic fetish objects by the editorial protocols of TV. These faces, too, he suggests, are technologically induced generators of fantasy that perform their own sex acts on the viewer.

48. For a discussion of Magritte's *Le Viol*, see Robin Adele Greeley, "Image, Text and the Female Body: Rene Magritte and the Surrealist Publications," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1992, p. 48–57.

In three of his most recent exhibitions, *Blue Invasion* (for the Sydney Festival, January 7–24, 2006), *Ooze* at Lehman Maupin (February 17 to March 24, 2007), and *dum-dum, metalbreath, wadcutter* (Emi Fontana Gallery, Milan, May 28 to July 28 2007), Oursler raises the stakes of his multivalent faciality to a flashpoint. In *dum-dum, metalbreath, wadcutter*, this move is managed through a daring iconographic innovation in one of the artist's most overtly critical installations, as the sculptural platforms and accompaniments for his projected personae are rendered—with appalling matter-of-factness—in the streamlined shape of bullets: long-range sniper bullets, common pistol rounds, spent "mushroom" bullets, what the artist calls "bullets-in-waiting," and mutilatingly efficient hollow points, which expand into the body on impact. *Blue Invasion* is the telescope to *dum-dum*'s microscope, moving from singular units of violence and warfare to cosmologically-scaled conflict, from the synecdoche of itemized munitions to the impalpable metaphorics of *Star Wars or War of the Worlds*. Sydney's Hyde Park became a staging ground for alien sightings as spectral physiognomies appeared in the trees along with a slime-green meteor cratered with another round of squirming faces. Oursler recalibrated the face-landscape relation here by offering it an impossibly deviant extraterrestrial dimension. The skin, the color, the geology, the language, and the actions of these aliens are conjured up in a remarkable compound of in situ sounds and images, then reformatted in a series of small books, each titled after a color, that reproduce alien diaries, charts, diagrams, speculative meditations, and drawings.

In addition to summarizing his own interest in the representation of color, addressed, as we have seen, in various allusions to TV test-cards and color charts, Oursler's *Yellow, Red, Blue, Orange, Green, Black* and *Purple* books, and the color-coded laser-cut aluminum panels in *Ooze*, take us back to Wittgenstein, who wrote his own *Blue* and *Brown Books*, and whose last work, *Remarks on Color*, outlined an eccentrically incisive critique of the phenomenological notion of color dominant in Western thought since Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Zür Farbenlehre* (*Theory of Colors*, 1810). Oursler peppers his own spectrum commentaries with the popular associative logic that underwrites the Romantic theory of color: "I'm blue I'm very sad I have SAD, Seasonal Affective Disor-

der," or "baby boy gets baby blue power" (*Blue*); the "red light district" or "it's your red letter day" (*Red*); "For the wounded a purple heart awarded after recovery" (*Purple*). But even as he advances these color-coordinated formulae, the colloquially speculative and confessionally ironic rhetorics in which they are delivered break their analogical messages down—so that the poetic reverie of Andrew Marvell's "green thought in a green shade," for example, is made over as "Green" becomes "a mean and enviable stream of thoughts flowing in my mind behind the right and natural and lush color" *(Green*). Layered with arcane scientific references, wavelength numerology, and UFO folklore, Oursler's ET color theory becomes a discursive net for the entrapment and sifting of alien incognitos.

For Oursler, aliens are figures of a radically improbable alteriority that displaces the residually humanist metrics of otherness that were so powerful in the art and critical worlds of the 1970s and 1980s. Detaching himself from the urban psychodramas of his earlier projected figures, Oursler's latest protagonists are embedded in the ultra-biomorphic, splash-shaped panels of the *Ooze* exhibition, which camouflage color appearance in its spectral points of origin. No longer apprehended through the logic of peepholes or portholes punctured through a surface according to which one imagines a humanoid presence "behind" the panel or "inside" a screen, the roving eyes, mouths, lips, and other facial parts co-present in these works now seep or ooze from their "supports" edged not by apertures but by fuzzy aggregates whose computer-generated contours morph in syncopated rhythms with both the complex outlines of the splash-like panels and the movements of various puckered lips, raised eyes, bared teeth, and so on.

Oursler's commitment to UFOlogy, extraterrestrial lifeforms, and speculative xenolingusitics is filtered through a matrix that joins radical aesthetics with philosophical inquiry and vernacular metaphysics. One point of commencement for this emerges as Oursler infiltrates himself into the subject position of the alien, most obviously in the photographs that represent his face painted with other-worldly colors and the pseudo-autobiographies of the booklets. Wittgenstein offered a less theatrical version of a similar sentiment, once remarking that, "I feel myself to be an alien in the world. If you have no ties to either mankind or to God, then you are an alien."[49] To these confessions of alien self-identification we should add two contexts, one philosophical, one aesthetic, that clinch the subtle imbrications between ET and IT, optical and semantic color, hallucination and para-reality to which Oursler's work, and some of Wittgenstein's writing, alludes. Perhaps Derek Jarman was right after all when, in a much-criticized gesture, he introduced a space alien into his film *Wittgenstein* (1993).[50] For Wittgenstein struggles, albeit fleetingly, with the famous thought experiment about the possible existence of "logical aliens" proposed by Gottlob Frege. Could there be, Frege mused, a class of intelligent beings whose rationale capacities operate according to different laws of logic than those supplying human reason? While Frege contended that the existence of such beings was physically impossible, Wittgenstein, like Oursler, flirted with the implications of nonhuman language (as in his elliptical remark that, "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him"[51]) if for no other reason than to learn from the logical aporia opened by the very process of speculating on the unknown.[52]

In one of his most teasing (and Wittgensteinian) pronouncements, Oursler offers a key for the interpretation of the work that makes up *Blue Invasion* and *Ooze*, providing at the same time one of those moments of "special practice and training" that Wittgenstein associates with dimensions of representation that are less (or more) than three: "The artist or the artwork," he writes, "is the alien, and the viewer is the earthling or the one I'm trying to communicate with."[53] The artist-

49. Ludwig Wittgenstein, cited by Ray Monk in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, Penguin Books, London 1990.

50. For more on the film, see Derek Jarman and Ken Butler, *Wittgenstein: The Derek Jarman Film*, British Film Institute, London 1993, which includes an introduction and script by Terry Eagleton, discussion by Jarman and Butler, and an array of film stills.

51. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations (1953)*, Blackwell, Oxford 2001, p. 190.

52. See Clevis R. Headley, "Wittgenstein and Frege on Madness: Searching for Logical Aliens," in Paul Weingartner, Gerhard Schurzand, and Georg Dorn (eds.), *The Role of Pragmatics in Contemporary Philosophy: Papers of the 20th International Wittgenstein Symposium, August 10-16*, Kirchber am Wechel, vol. 1, text 395.

alien-artwork compound takes its place in a genealogy of aesthetic reckoning one origin for which Theodor Adorno attributes to Hegel: "In one of the most remarkable passages of his *Aesthetics*, Hegel defined the task of art as the appropriation of the alien."[54] Adorno himself is, perhaps, the most articulate legatee of this tradition, developing in his own *Aesthetic Theory* an almost unfathomable dialectic worked out between the formal conditions of the artwork and the alien heterogeneities on which it depends: "By its mere existence, every artwork, as alien artwork to what is alienated, conjures up the circus and yet is lost as soon as it emulates it. Art becomes an image not directly by becoming an *apparition* but only through the counter-tendency to it. The pre-artistic level of art is at the same time the memento of its anti-cultural character, its suspicion of its antithesis to the empirical world that leaves this world untouched … Important artworks," he concludes, "nevertheless seek to incorporate this art-alien layer."[55]

53. This sentence appears as the caption to a full-page photograph of Oursler posed against two outline figure drawings in Karen Wright, "Close Encounters: Tony Oursler's Alien Invasion," *Modern Painters*, March 2006, p. 72.

54. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1997, p. 339.

55. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 108. Adorno develops these ideas throughout this study, arguing, for example, that "the subject only becomes the essence of the artwork when it confronts it foreignly, externally, and compensates for the foreigness by substituting itself for the work" (p. 346). Thinking of the recall of one's earliest childhood moments, Adorno notes elsewhere that, "the I which one remembers, which one once was and potentially is once again, becomes at the same time an other, an alien, to be detachedly observed"; later in the same text he expands on his notion of "loving the alien," observing that: "The reconciled condition would not annex the alien [Fremde] by means of a philosophical imperialism, but would find its happiness in the fact that the latter remains what is distant and divergent in the given nearness, as far beyond the heterogeneous as what is its own." *Negative Dialectics*, trans. Dennis Redmond (2001), http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/ND2Trans.txt