

# Interview Lynne Cooke and Tony Oursler

lc – When we first started discussing this project, it was going to be a book on your drawings. Looking at the proposed selection of plates now, it seems that the focus has shifted a lot, perhaps in response to your very broad, or encompassing, definition of drawing.

to – Yes. In fact it's not drawing at all. If it's anything, it's really painting—because there's more paint involved than pencil or pen or whatever ... [They laugh] I don't think the word drawing is going to appear in the title, but I like the term "drawing" because it implies something that, in some way, is temporal or extemporaneous.

lc – You said in a previous interview that you think of drawing as open, as somehow not finalized, whereas painting, by contrast, often suggests something resolved or finished. And yet as I look back over your work from the past three decades there is very little that could be described, in conventional terms, as drawing. It seems that, for you, there's no hard and fast boundary separating drawing from almost everything else you do.

to – When, recently, I was trying to imagine what a drawing was, I started to think of it as a chain of events. In a way you could say it starts at the wall when I plug something in that connects to the electricity through a wire. As the electricity flows into the artwork, it starts a disc, which is like a big spiral of light and mirrors, spinning, and that comes out onto a screen. This echoes the process of shooting with a camera, the product of which, in turn, is run through a computer. Imagine the paths and conversions the image takes inside, while I crunch and warp it with the program called the Mesh Warp, then further process it in some way. Fill in the blanks ... my hand writing a script, a performer reading it, then speaking ... You could even say that during the shooting the camera swallows a cone of light that is captured, written onto a chip inside the camera, and then written onto the tape or put onto the disc, and then another line—another wire—takes it into the computer ... That's the drawing: all those decisions, those marks of decision making, those flows of electricity, of information. When the work is finished it's frozen, at least to some

degree, yet it's still alive somehow: it's talking and moving and gesticulating.

To talk about drawing, at this moment in time, is a little absurd, because in the 1970s artists like John Baldessari were already talking about camera movement as a kind of drawing device. That's where I'm coming from in these recent pieces—the splatter video/paintings. Within the vast information flow that can no longer be contained, drawing is that process of trying to connect it and harness it. Does that make sense?

lc – Yes, absolutely. Where does this idea of drawing first manifest itself in your work? You have talked about 1991 as a kind of Year Zero, a time when you rethought your practice pretty thoroughly. Soon after that, you abandoned the making of single-channel videos and created the first of the dummies. Was that also the moment when the first works on paper appeared?

ro – Well, no, for years I had painted for media space, for the camera, in order to produce tapes and installations. There were also pictures that did not move, but at that moment they took on a conceptual focus that they hadn't had before. It involved the death of a certain kind of pictorial space, which I think of as the classical space that one peers into from a distance. From then on I tried to make 2-dimensional representations that worked in new ways. Each series was made with a different experiment in mind. First were watercolors, the *Closet Paintings*—obviously a pun on being a closet painter. They were portraits of people's spaces, or mindsets, by reference to what they had in the medicine cabinet or under the sink. Before that, whether I was working on paper or painting, I was in some sense making classical painting. Before 1991, when the works were not studies, there was always a disconnection from the installation work. After that, there was more of an attempt to connect the wall works to the thinking behind the installations and tapes—and to push them in that direction. For example, there were lenses in those constructed wood hex paintings based on the Pennsylvania Dutch's way of marking their architecture with protective signs. And then there were also works

on cloth, like the piece that says “Model Release Form” at the top. I was really interested in the way people sort of signed over their ownership of intellectual property for money; it almost involves some kind of contemporary slavery. Since 1991, those ways of opening up beyond conventional pictures have continued.

lc – Do you see your work dividing loosely into two main bodies, or types, of practice? On the one hand, a great deal of your work involves working collaboratively, or working with other professionals whom you hire because of their specialized skills. On the other hand, when you're making smaller works on paper, the situation seems utterly different in that it involves just yourself. Drawing is often traditionally described as a more private activity. It's personal, not simply because it's made by one person working in isolation but because, if it's small in format and scale and intimate in touch as was traditionally the case, then it's viewed by a solitary spectator. That suggests a one-to-one engagement; a pretty direct transmission from the maker to the receiver. Does this distinction between these two types of working hold up in your mind?

ro – Absolutely. That kind of intimacy suggests a certain kind of symbiotic space—which is probably one of the things that always draws me back to that way of working. As you say, that kind of private, handmade space offers a unique place to be with the viewer. There's a beautiful book by Philip K. Dick—I think it's called *Galactic Pot-Healer*—which contains some really wonderful thoughts about the intimacy of craft and about making whole something that has been shattered, finding that shard, rebuilding the experience, just for the sake of making it art. I've often thought that that's one of the simple things that is really lost in all the discussion about art now. What separates artists and art from other enterprises in a mass-produced culture is that they are lucky enough to make unique things. What that means is often forgotten. It is not about a hierarchy, about putting the artist on a pedestal; it's about being able to collaborate with the viewer in some way on a one to one basis. It's about respect for the receivers' singularity and creativity as



*Closet Painting (Pepto-Bismol)*, 1992



Detail of Mesh Warp technique



*Fantastic Prayers* (with Constance De Jong and Stephen Vitiello), 2000  
CD-Rom

they put the shards together.

That said, I've taken a strange approach sometimes, in that I'll use assistants to draw things on an intimate scale and then rework what they do. In a way, I'm kind of breaking that sense of trust, the belief that these works are anatomically connected to me, which is the way people automatically react when they see a drawing. [Laughs] Those particular works from the late 1990s into, say, 2003, were really more intellectually than physically connected to me. They were related to my timeline project, which can be seen on my website and in a few books. It's a loose alternative history of art from the point of view of virtual image production. So the drawings were a way of processing links within disparities, making connections across time and various scientific fields. It was a perfect situation to involve many hands in the same frame. When I first exhibited a group of them, all my assistants showed up at the opening. It was quite funny. They were standing around in the gallery saying, “Oh, yeah, I worked on this one, I did that one,” and so forth. It really upset certain people working at the gallery, they asked me to have them stop saying things like that during the opening. [They laugh]

lc – Oh, that's a great story.

ro – Suddenly I thought, “What have I done? I've cheated people in some way.” Then I realized how ridiculous the situation was. In the past, painters always used assistants. But, of course, they tried to get their assistants to paint in a way that resembled their own style, whereas I wanted my assistants to paint in any way they wanted. They would make a move, then I would ... it was almost like a chess game. At one point, I had a couple of color-blind guys working for me, fantastic guys ...

lc – Deliberately?

ro – No, it was the luck of the draw: I didn't find out for a long time that they were color-blind. But that was the fun of it: it wasn't about controlling the situation. One thing that I always liked about drawing was that kind of loss of control. On the wall a drawing is so contained; no matter how far out of control it gets, how far you break it up, as with Rauschenberg or

the Surrealists, it's still somehow contained. So, in a way, you can't lose. [Laughs]

LC – Did having your assistants contribute to these compositions have a political as well as conceptual aspect to it?

TO – It's hard to say. They were always directed, but to be honest, I've gone back and forth on the question. At one point, it sort of became more work to finish the works. I would get whatever the assistant had done, then I would often think: now I have to fix it. Parts of it are perfect, amazing, nothing I would ever do myself, but it's not exactly the way I want it. Or, it's broken, and now it needs to be fixed. There is something political in this broken relationship. The editing process, the re-cutting, reworking, and the building backed up, and eventually began to take up to two years to complete. It was fun for a couple of years, but then it became too much work. And also, I felt a little guilty about the question of identity because people thought that because the piece looked so personal it was my hand. The overall project was conceptual—I've done lots of work on identity shifting, and multiple personalities—but, in the end, there was something disturbing about it to me. How easily people project identity disturbed me, how much it is valued seemed to point to a shared feeling of cultural disenfranchisement. People are very primitive in the way that they look at work—even fairly sophisticated people. That's been proven time and time again. If a writer writes about a certain thing, then people will immediately transpose it into an autobiographical statement ...

LC – That must have happened to you a lot, beginning with those times when you dealt with drug culture. Whether in music, literature, or the visual arts, it's often assumed that if someone's addressing issues like that, they must have had first-hand experiences themselves; it wouldn't be possible otherwise.

TO – Yes. That happened to me very early on, when I was writing science-fiction stories in eighth grade! I remember I wrote this long, elaborate sort of fantasy/sci-fi story that I was very proud of. [Chuckles] I gave it to my teacher, and she immedi-

ately brought me down to the headmaster's office. They called my parents. "Your son is on psychedelic drugs." [Laughs] And of course, you know, still to this day, I've never taken psychedelic drugs ... But this connects to the way that photography entered my work. Another of my weird habits is to have made, I don't know, maybe 15,000 photographs in the past ten years or so, which I've shown to almost nobody. Around the time that I stopped working with painting assistants, I started cutting some of this source material up, collaging my photographs, then over-painting. Working with photographic material rather than using projections or tracings of that material introduced something more impersonal as a starting point, something other than just my own signs of mark making.

LC – Do you take photographs as aide-memoires? Is photography, for you, like a diary, a way of noting things that are of interest? Did you ever develop a larger purpose for it?

TO – Over that period of time there was a big mixture: some are actually set up photographs, others are video stills, and then there are lots of subsets, such as projects and fantasy books. Our CDROM/web project *Fantastic Prayers* is very photographic and yet very much a public artwork. Although most images were shot casually, there is a continuity—some free-flowing research that seems to run through the images. I've always made photographs that I wanted to exhibit. However, early on, in the 1970s and 1980s, it was cost prohibitive: it was just so expensive. For the same reason, I gave up filmmaking. More recently, some of these works, such as the trash pictures, were exhibited, in Europe mostly. But there's very little public continuity in what I've done with them. Eventually, perhaps soon, I'd like to make either a website, or a book, or something similar. That's what you should do when you are 50 ... [they laugh] you have to show them all then.

Recently, I've started to develop yet another strange branch: Photoshopped work that is manipulated, and then printed out. A collaboration with David Askevold over the last six months conflated photo, painting, and video. He was so fearless in his ability to move between mediums, layering them to get deep

inside them. I've always been in love with his mind: he lived in a world of images that most people would try to escape, that would make you turn your head away, or block out. He was always lifting the cultural rock, one piece after another. It was such a pleasure to bounce things back and forth between Halifax and New York City with him. He would come up with a system: we would pick a time, say midnight Friday, a sound track, say, *Alien II*, and a duration of activity. Draw with eyes closed for one half hour, then shoot photos, maybe video too. Email each other ...

LC – In 1996–1997 you did a show for the Kassel Kunstverein. You called it *My Drawings: 1976 to 1996*. Looking at the catalogue today, there's a lot of work that most people wouldn't think of as drawings. I'm struck by its title; not simply because you suggest that everything in it is drawing, but because you call it "My drawings." [Oursler laughs] One way of reading this is to consider it a more personal index of your visual world than would be the case if the show had been given the more neutral and convention title, *Works* ..., that is, without the personal pronoun, and without the sense of an intimate entry into your inner world. Then, further complicating these associations, is the fact that the image you put on the cover is a watercolor of a camera! You seem to set up a series of contradictory expectations and then corral a whole range of work into this ambiguous frame. Was this approach a reaction to the fact that other works you were making concurrently were beginning to become much more public? For example, *The Influence Machine*, shown first in New York at Madison Park and then in Soho Square in London. In that period were you again trying to push at both ends of the spectrum simultaneously?

TO – That's a really good read on that catalogue. I had a lot of fun with the title for this particular very homemade book. It was done by the curator of the show, Bernhard Balkenhol, who home-published it. We enjoyed doing it. Since he had one of the first scanners and computers that were able to hold high enough resolution images to print, he came up with the idea that you should be able to see the texture of the paper on which

each work was made. That's more or less impossible, but we made a good effort. I really like its kind of homemade feeling; for example, the over-thick pages and the detailing.

You can say that there was a schism that I was playing across in that publication. I definitely wanted to reconcile the two ends of the spectrum. After making the projected installations with figures and eyes for some time, I wanted to introduce different approaches that people were not familiar with. First, there were the older drawing painting props; but gradually I became more and more focused on public works. So there is a private phase to this aspect of my work and then an expanding public drive. Prior to 2000 it was so hard to work with technology in a public place. I did a few window projections and other public projects, but it was difficult. In 2000 I was very lucky to be able to make *The Influence Machine* with the help of the Public Art Fund and Art Angel, and I was able to explore all sorts of new issues, and a new scale, and what it means to be in a public arena. So there began a string of public works and whole new way of making images: images were let loose on the landscape, projected on smoke and water, trees and buildings. Then, of course, there's also the question of iconography, of what works in a specific place: a library, a border town, a desert, a beach, and why?

LC – Given the delays, deferrals, and filtering of subject matter that inevitably goes on with these kinds of projects in the public arena, what for you are their positive aspects?

TO – I believe that there will be an evolution in what a cityscape can be in 50 years or so, due to a number of different elements, not just technology. Right now, a vast portion of the urban space in any city is unused and completely banal, yet it has interesting scale shifts. I've been thinking a lot lately about how to try and understand it, and how to be part of the beginning of an incursion into that space. It's beyond advertising and cinema: we need a new language. These spaces have become so normalized that, mostly, people are bored by them. Yet when something new happens, when there's a really interesting experience, people engage differently. At that moment you have a

chance to become part of the real life of a city, a shared space with all its grim beauty—from the gum on the sidewalk to the skyscraper. That’s one of the most exciting things about public art, sometimes even more so when it’s permanent. It’s also interesting that sometimes things can be switched out ...

LC – Updated?

TO – Yeah.

LC – With public interventions, the conditions of a particular site, or its past histories, or its demographics, or any number of other related factors, can become parameters that determine and help shape a work. That’s very different from the process of generating something in a vacuum—in the studio—by yourself.

TO – That kind of amplification or connection with various layers of reality and history is really exciting. For example, parts of *The Influence Machine* had to do with the Gothic, and there were also a lot of references to horror movies, spiritualism, and certain kinds of technologies that are used to talk to the dead. The situation in Soho Square was ideal, because it was right near the site of the former lab of John L. Baird, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century scientist who invented mechanical television. The piece has now become part of the lore of that neighborhood. That will probably diminish as time goes by but, at the moment, people still remember it; it adds to the history of that space.

At the Arts Arcade in Phoenix, I wanted again to work with the lore of the area. It’s one of the fastest growing cities in North America but there are all sorts of urban problems due to the urban planning and the demolishing of past histories. I wanted somehow to grapple with that. Certain ideas about culture have fallen apart there. People were really proud of this theater complex, but they later found out that because the area around the theater, which was used only for three hours a night, was mostly empty, it had become a place for drug addicts and the homeless. So, for better or worse, the new idea is to put in stores and a convention center. This project became part of an effort, which included bringing in commerce—bookstores, and coffee shops, and other things—to keep this arts area alive.



*Flucht*, 2001  
Multimedia installation



*Influence Machine (Swedish Version)*, 2002  
Multimedia installation



Carpet, detail of *Million Colors*, 2006

I wanted to look at the history of the West, and work with actors from that area. So we did a casting call to try to reflect, in a very simple way, the people who live there, and make them part of it. Of course, I also used a few of my own actors from here. Some of the incredible history of the Grand Canyon, Suspicion Mountain, copper and gold mining all became part of the language of the piece, and of the way that it was constructed. This became a big research project on Phoenix at large; in that sense it’s the most specific piece I’ve ever done. I worked with the building design, changing areas such as walls and the floor, into moving, speaking images. The text was written in a vernacular rather than a more poetic way: it’s rambling, almost conversational, and so it’s easy to pick up on. I’m very proud to have that piece. Like the piece in the Seattle Library too, these big public commissions in one way or another become research projects for me.

LC – What other changes do you see in your visual vocabulary that stem from working in the public arena?

TO – Because the imagery in a lot of these bigger pieces ends up being two-dimensional, it’s forced me to open up to a space that I rejected back in 1991: the so-called pictorial space. In the public works there are now links to the small-scale pieces, even the works on paper. There’s an intimate aspect to the working process, made quietly in the studio, sometimes alone, that can be transferred to a large lonely void of architecture. I remember a quote from Newton, which is something like: you don’t see the object—the apple—only the color red reflecting off the apple. With large projections into landscape or cityscape, images fuse into something beyond the sum of the two. That’s amazing; it’s a part of the language I’ve got to understand. Working recently in New Zealand, on the Gibbs Farm, that transformation has been essential to the image production.

LC – Do those images get reflected off water ...

TO – Off water and mud, with trees and landscape over to the side.

LC – Did those landscape conditions generate a train of thought that produced the imagery?

TO – It’s the most intuitive project that I’ve done in a long time, because it’s very much about edges and the way water meets the land in this very, very shallow three-mile tidal basin. I kind of fell in love with the enormous amount of mud and so was reading a lot about the Golem, and also thinking about evolution, about life coming out of the mud and going back into the mud, about creatures coming out of the sea, decomposing, and going back into the sea. I think Darwin stopped near there on his epic voyage.

Then there was the way that, with the large slope running down to the water, everything just broke up into these sorts of Minimalist planes. I made a lot of material that didn’t work. And then I had one very interesting kind of optical moment—it’s something that happens once in a while, but not very often, when I discover something optically that I’ve never really seen before. I had made a nest of rubber snakes, which I painted and shot in the studio, moving them three-dimensionally under a really harsh light. I thought it would never add up to anything, but I wanted to try it. When you’re working with blinders on, in a situation like that, you have to shoot a lot of material and then just try it: it’s part of the process. But I never really believe anything until I see it. This particular image had a lot of detail and dimensionality to it; when projected it popped up into the air in some funny way, and looked almost holographic. I’m not trying to do optical illusions, but it was a very interesting effect that couldn’t be denied. In a weird way it goes back to that 1991 moment, when I was thinking about the picture plane. When you’re looking at a picture you’re very much aware, if you’re an artist or someone who knows about pictures, that you’re looking into someone’s constructed world. When you’re looking, for example, at a Hieronymus Bosch space, it’s obvious that you have to agree to suspend disbelief, and then you enter in that world. But you’re not psychologically part of it. To make a work that is part of your world, physically and psychologically, is something I’ve been striving for for a long time—suddenly, you’re part of the picture. It was really happening with this silly nest of rubber snakes. Anyway, that led

me—this is a long-winded answer—back to analyzing that image and then shooting a whole new body of work that used some of the same optical properties, and that had this same kind of dimensionality, almost like a Calder moving in space. It's funny: a kind of media chiaroscuro. Everything then became three-dimensional, moving in space, with sort of high contrast. For example, there was a great picture of a hand coming out of muck, like in a horror movie. You would really have enjoyed how we made that in the studio. [Laughs] It was so foul: an arm in a big bucket of mud, in a big frame, coming up and going back down. Quite obscene. So this imagery then became very much about life and death on a primordial level. I kept thinking of some of my favorite imagery from what you might call, for lack of a better word, the whole evolutionary “mythology”—even though it is accepted as a science. A scientist named Stanley Miller tried to prove how life began on earth from the primordial soup. What he did was to put all these enzymes and stuff into a tank and then shoot it with electricity. He didn't make life, but certain of the chemicals went to the next level, connecting in some way. I always liked this soup level of connecting and disconnecting: we can somehow understand it but not quite understand it. And so most of the imagery for this piece stayed on that very primitive level—there is no spoken language, just some sounds once in a while—and there are naked forms, pre-humanoid skulls morphing together, so that there's an archeological element to it, too.

LC – Does it run only at night?

TO – It will start at sunset. And then over several hours the images slowly emerge like a long natural dissolve; the atmospheric effects make it different every day. The images are broken up in new ways all the time. The footage is about two-and-a-half hours long. What I'm working on now is the interplay between the four different projections and how they will connect with peripheral vision. When you're looking at the piece now, there's almost always one that's just tickling your peripheral vision. I hope it ends up that way because peripheral space—and the feeling that there's always something there on

the margin of what you're seeing—is something I've long been obsessed with, as you know. I think probably that whether people know it or not, they think a lot about that edge: if you're driving or walking, it's the beginning of one space and the end of another; of one outside of you and one inside you. In this piece for New Zealand it becomes a metaphor for the unknown and known. And so if the project works out, you'll always be seeing something that's just appearing—and disappearing—which is perfect, I think, for a night installation in that specific area.

LC – It's a pretty remote location isn't it? I didn't see the site at night but even during the day somehow you sense, physically, that it's quite isolated and that the spaces directly in front of you go on more or less indefinitely. Ultimately, they merge with the ocean: there's no real boundary. This kind of reaction comes, it seems to me, as much from a bodily-based response as from any conceptual knowledge about the unusual character of this natural site.

TO – Absolutely. It's a really unique area. I've spent many days there, and I never felt that there was anyone else around. It's very strange.

LC – I wanted also to ask you more generally about how you generate imagery. Perhaps the best way to begin this is to quote from a statement you made in 2005: “I like to think in terms of the carrier of the image: which images carry cultural resonance at any moment ... I guess I'm talking about video. The artist should, in my mind, be the carrier of cultural images.” That seems to me to be something you could have said at any moment since your beginnings as an artist in 1976. As you have often stated, for you as an artist, part of the drive to working with video is to be in the midst of what is going on, and to try to shift the ways that images are being made, our visual world is being constructed, and we are being shaped by media technologies, and television especially. You then said something that really surprised me. “But as you go along, there's another problem. As cultural space becomes very clogged with meaningless image production, all of a sudden painting becomes a

contemplative space. For me, it's become more relevant today than maybe it would have been at other times.” What struck me was that during the 30 years that separate the mid-1970s from the present, our world has become so saturated by digital and technological imagery as to make it, in effect, a significantly different world for you. For that saturation, or clogging, as you went on to argue, “has had a kind of inversion, making painting or handmade images—and I'd rather say handmade images at the moment—somehow an alternative space that's valuable again.”

In the art world at the moment, as, indeed, in the 1970s, there's a tendency to think of painting as the conservative or default position. It's seen as a mainstream medium that suits this very conservative, moneyed era. Your reading, however, places a very different value on painting or, perhaps better, on handmade images. It seems to me that, as in the past, you are again responding closely to the current moment or, at least, your reading of it. The seemingly surprising conclusion you have reached about the options available for working critically has led you not only to revise but even reverse where you once were, and through that to question the very basis of your practice over the past three decades.

TO – [Laughs] I was very surprised to get to that point, because as you know, I had had to sort of kill painting for myself—which I guess a lot of artists had done. As a kid I so idealized it. To get to the point, today, of looking not only at painting, but at abstraction as an interesting and viable spot in a culture that is totally permeated with things that switch on is ... I think it's important to go back and analyze what can be done with certain mediums.

The splatter paintings recently exhibited at Lehman Maupin in New York were a reaction to that history. Each was a blowup of a trace of a drip, or drop, or drool—some kind of liquid spill. Color is such a personal thing—“I look great in blue!”—yet color carries a slippery cultural history of absurd codification. Depending on which subculture you read, red is for valentines, white for purity or semen, purple for mourning. In these pan-

els I wanted to play across the projected light of tv and the reflected color fields, suggesting body fluids, blood splatter patterns, and a history of painted space. They all speak texts very quietly. I think a painting should whisper if it has to say anything. In any one of these works there are pools of different mediums, perspectives, and conflicting languages. This is an attempt to reconcile two worlds that don't coexist.

It's taken me a long time to realize that one of the problems with video and film is that they are oversaturated with information and that, maybe, all that information doesn't have to be there. I've been thinking a lot recently about this situation. It's like a dump, an information dump site, with a culture of degradation around it, hinted at in the extremely violent movies made by the French filmmaker Catherine Breillat. That then turns into the toxic American garbage, like *Hostel* ... And then there's also the sort of Donald Trump era in television, where people watch people get fired or humiliated or detoxed on tv. It seems as if, out of sheer boredom, people want to be tortured by their own culture. [Laughs]

LC – That's a really persuasive way of putting it.

TO – Right now, I can imagine that contemplative space is going to really be important again. It's more interesting to me to see whether abstraction can become a really sophisticated space than to try to take stuff from pop culture and re-cut it ... I guess it also has to do with the fact I no longer believe that I can learn anything at all from pop culture. [Laughs] I'm not saying that arrogantly. One of the things that I used to enjoy doing was kind of fencing with pop culture: “Well, what about this? Why did this occur? How does this reflect some historical event or ... ?” Maybe I've gotten to another Year Zero, another rehash moment like 1991—I turned cable off two, almost three, years ago so I don't even really know what the shows are. Does that answer your question?

LC – Yes, it does. It leads me to wonder about another statement you made which, at least until recently, seems also to have held true for the past 30 years, in which you have been working: “I like to keep the viewer in the vernacular.” At the risk of

turning that statement into a sound bite, it seems to me good shorthand for saying quite a number of things that have been fundamental to your practice. “Fencing with pop culture” is also a phrase which nicely sums up a lot. But as this discussion has developed, I’ve begun to realize that these may no longer be positions you want to maintain, that there may be other places you would rather be exploring.

ro – I think at a certain point you have to just make it, rather than reflect it or work in it. That’s what I want to do now: to make things that aren’t necessarily reflections of other things. Work with the same basic human drives that pop culture exploits, in new ways.

lc – That are not reactive in a direct way?

ro – Yeah. Not reactive at all. Because I don’t think that there’s anything to react to at this point. Of course, probably tomorrow I’ll see another Michel Gondry movie or something else and say, “Oh, yeah. He’s got it.” But this is also probably part of turning 50. I can’t look at politics now and say, “Oh, well, you know, that’s the old men doing it.” I have to say, “That’s us doing it. That’s me and my generation doing it.” And so there’s a certain feeling that I have to do what I believe, and that is to make things and to make them with people for people, and not translate them through some kind of pop cultural loop. It’s going to be a very interesting way to work in the future. I think the phase we’re now in with a lot of communicative technologies argues that Hollywood worked too well; television worked perfectly. But it’s obvious to me that they are destructive, they’re not working at all: their whole strategies have to be rethought, and redone because they haven’t been explored on even the most rudimentary level. The internet has a lot of possibilities that have never been touched, that were either ignored or went out of fashion, and are now forming Webkinz or MySpace, which are interesting to watch. Now there are interactive possibilities, ways in which we can connect in meaningful ways. The thinking is not medium specific—low tech, hi tech, who cares?—we have everything we need to make new work: the question is how can connections become more alive.

lc – Maybe this next question is part of this same point. You once said: “Today, the simulacra is as real as the rest.” But now you seem to be saying that you want to make works that acknowledge a difference between what’s real and what’s mediated, that is, “real,” within inverted commas, like reality television.

ro – There’s definitely been a shift in my thinking, and I’ve changed my point of view completely on that issue. The simulacra have brought some interesting elements. Yet they are overshadowed by the fact that we’re more detached than ever. Facilitation of the disconnect, while fascinating in theory, is sad when kids are learning to shoot with the Nintendo Wii. (Although there are some exceptions like the great tv show *Deadwood*.) Basically we’re facing a kind of a scorched-earth situation with popular culture. I’ve not lost faith in technology’s ability to create spaces in which we can manipulate consciousness and interact with people. I believe that will never go away, it will just get better; one day, you’ll just plug in and your money will get drained away along with other things. The question is always how we go about using it. It goes back to an argument that’s almost Marxian. Though there’s no way to measure it, the entertainment complex is the place where people become the most disenfranchised. You can measure when somebody can’t eat, or when they have a disease, but you can’t measure where somebody’s dreams are destroyed. That’s where I’m interested in drawing lines. I don’t know whether I am actually doing it ... Just recognizing the problem is one thing: it’s good to call out the problem when you see it. When you look at the history of tv, which has now become just a stand-in for lots of new mimetic technologies, there’s no doubt in my mind that in some way it should have been regulated as a drug. Though there are very few ways of measuring it and/or dealing with it, we’re almost now at that point. As I’ve said a million times, by the time my generation had graduated from high school, they’d watched tv more than they had done anything else except sleep. When you have these kinds of statistics, it becomes a medical thing. It’s no longer just a hobby. The ben-

eficiaries are advertising agencies and manufacturers of certain goods. It’s a very cheap trade for people’s lives, for their time and energy. You can say, “Well, people had a choice.” But I don’t know [laughs] if they really had a choice, or if they still have a choice. Just as we don’t allow certain things in the drinking water, so this too needs to be regulated ... It’s a responsibility. I hope that culture makers can do something now that will be really important.

lc – I agree. The impact of these electronic technologies has expanded so much in the past decade that this does feel like the moment when we’ve got to grapple with it, on a personal level at least. Whether you begin by turning off cable or even, occasionally, the cell phone, or by not allowing email and SMSs to serve as continuous unregulated prompts, it’s important to try to take this invasion of our personal spaces in hand rather than just be at the mercy of it.

ro – Yeah. And it feels good to be in the art world. I feel that the decision I made to become an artist was the right one. I’ve seen so many things fall to the wayside: it’s the one area that I still feel optimistic about—it’s an area where a person can break a few things, fix a few things. Of course, there are certain things happening at the moment that aren’t very positive. But I’m not going to get into that.