

## **Switched October 8, 2010**

### **Tony Oursler's New Works Tackle the 'Uncanny' in Sculpture and at Adobe Museum**

In his study of the 'uncanny,' Sigmund Freud writes, "The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar." Through repression, Freud argues, the once-safe becomes foreign, disturbing, uncanny. Freudian thought influences Tony Oursler's newest pieces, debuting jointly at the Adobe Museum of Digital Media and at Lehmann-Maupin (IRL, no less). Instead of the "repressed" that Freud suggests as a creep-factor, Oursler thinks that the uncanny occurs when humanity gets lost in technology (as with filmed faces, or distorted projections). Oursler explains, "What is interesting about the uncanny is not the gothic quality or a creepy nature, but the fact that it's a disruption of the fabric of reality."

Onto sculpted objects, often bulbous or deformed in shape, Oursler projects familiar and corporal videos. An odd, oval structure may subtly resemble a head, but, when an actual face is displayed on its surface with a projector (in this case, a miniature, handheld one), the piece resembles a deformed, unsettling version of something we've seen before. Both of Oursler's exhibitions expound roboticist Masahiro Mori's "uncanny valley" theory. The theory considers Freud's definition, and suggests that, as something becomes more and more like a human, it becomes more and more familiar. Suddenly, though, when it is most human-like (like the singing heads that terrorized us at Art Basel, or even the evil dentist drooling automatons), it becomes really uncanny, and familiarity rapidly decreases. The "peak" and "valley" (also the titles of Oursler's two shows) are made more complex by new ways of representing humans: online, in video, social networking. "I extended (Freud's) theory to relate to the Internet itself," Oursler says. "It's not a robot that we fear in terms of human displacement -- but displacement of humanity in a technological system."

Currently on display at the New York gallery Lehmann Maupin, the native New Yorker's show 'Peak' evokes standing on the precipice of the familiar, and watching it grow more and more eerie through technology. Oursler has played with scale in the past. (See our Intro to Tech in Art guide for an introduction to his large-scale works.) And, in 'Peak,' he uses tiny projectors to create miniature, moving dioramas. Viewers must squint to make out human forms, but they exist, unaltered save for the eerie materials they are placed upon. In the piece 'Turning Test,' an eye appears on a rough, circular shape, making it a strange, one-eyed face. Oursler himself slithers around the tube-like exterior, and his projected image looks as if it is crawling along a piece of blue plastic. Then, Oursler hearkens back to Freud in 'Black Box,' which features a nude woman "trapped" inside a cube of black resin, her projected self hopping in and out of the box's center. "I can't recognize that!" she exclaims. Then, back to the familiar: "It looks like something I know." Really emphasizing the safe/uncanny overlap, with 'Finger,' Oursler takes a model finger, and projects an image of a finger onto it. A small figure with a woman's moving head sits under a glass dome, screaming the reoccurring phrase: "It happened already! It happened already!"

Oursler continues his exploration of the familiar and disturbing with his online show 'Valley,' held as the inaugural exhibition in the Adobe Museum of Digital Media, which launched this week. Open 365 days a year from anywhere in the world, it's the first global art space with no guards and no admission fee. Oursler feels energized by the concept. "Cyberspace is this new space that is being defined all the time, but it is really indefinable. The art world can be strangely conservative and cling to the suggestion that art must be tied to physicality... when the average person is used to virtual living already."

The Museum is an entirely virtual space designed by architect Filippo Innocenti that, in real life, would span over 620,000 square feet. A fluidly shaped set of towers house the archives, and an open atrium is home to the exhibitions, which will include works that examine broadcast communications and product development in addition to art. (Upcoming exhibitions include Mariko Mori, known for her futuristic photos, video works and installations, and John Maeda, the graphic-designer-cum-computer-scientist and president of the Rhode Island School of Design.) A floating, cyborg fish-flower hybrid acts as your personal guide as you traverse the virtual space.

Despite the free-flowing accessibility of the Museum, Oursler's 'Valley' seems designed to confuse the viewer/user, at least at first. A virtual flowchart of 17 zones or works seems logically oriented at the outset, but, as Oursler notes in the introduction to the exhibit, "it's an idiosyncratic flowchart... the viewer might say, 'There's something wrong here, like sex being represented by a pie chart, that's not my sexuality.'" The key to the works is "to get people to take a position, rather than just go into the Internet and follow the points where you're supposed to go," he says. "The project was a chance to look at the monster that we call the internet... to make some kind of playful, almost gamelike structure for the viewer that used some of the means of exploration that people are familiar with on the Internet. Skyping, clicking, you know."

Like 'Peak,' the works examine our relationship to the technological landscape, as well as the uncanny in general. Taking cues from Sigmund Freud, Ernst Jentsch and Mori, Oursler presents the user with a series of interactive vignettes that intrigue as much as they disconcert. Tom Eccles, a Bard professor of curatorial studies who organized Oursler's show, appears in pop-up bubbles with a painted face throughout the exhibit, offering Beckettian one-liners like "I'm unique, a real one, special" and "Everything is the same -- don't you see it?" as you illogically navigate from one vignette to the next. In the 'Uncanny Valley' work, Oursler himself traverses Mori's classic graph while questioning the realism of his human-simulacrum partner, whose voice "is somehow spooky" and "edges aren't quite holding."

Oursler understands that the two shows are interrelated. "One of the exhibitions is in cyberspace -- and the other is in a classic industrial space in the Lower East side with physical objects. So I wanted to have a push/pull between the two. The installation on Chrystie is a lot more poetic and involved linguistically. The website is a bit more broader. Altogether, it's a complex chain reaction." But for him, the uncanny isn't necessarily as bone-chilling as a robo-dental patient. "Instead of it being a 'scary' moment, the moment of anxiety is a chance to reorder things. That's what I am interested in. The breakup and reordering of systems."