

Getting Inside Oursler's Heads

Despite being known for making multimedia “automatons” (videos of faces projected onto sculptural objects), **Tony Oursler** identifies himself as having been “a closet writer for many years.” It’s a notion that took hold during his childhood, when his father worked at *Reader’s Digest* and his mother carried on her Irish family’s tradition of vivid storytelling. “I’m the strange cog between visual and written,” the artist says.

That duality is fleshed out in the new book *Tony Oursler / Vox Vernacular: An Anthology* (Yale University Press), which gathers 50 transcripts of Oursler’s artworks from the

last 36 years accompanied by photographs. The publication is a spin-off of his recent exhibition “Phantasmagoria” at the Museum of Contemporary Arts of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation in Hornu, Belgium.

Oursler’s cross-platform work often cannot be pinned down by language. His *Thought Forms* (2006)—projections of distorted faces portraying water, dust, and mercury—could be classified as sculpture, video, performance, or installation. His outdoor project *Influence Machine* (2000), in which ghastly “talking lights” materialized on trees, buildings, and fog, is similarly amorphous when it comes to attaching a definition. So a compendium of texts from such works seems like an ironic way to represent Oursler, who notes, “My early idea of what could be

art for my generation was an exploded TV.”

While putting together the book, whenever Oursler mentioned the idea of transcribing his art, “people would look at me with blank stares, like, *huh?*” he says. “People know there’s language in my work but I’m not sure how they think of it, or if they think of it at all.”

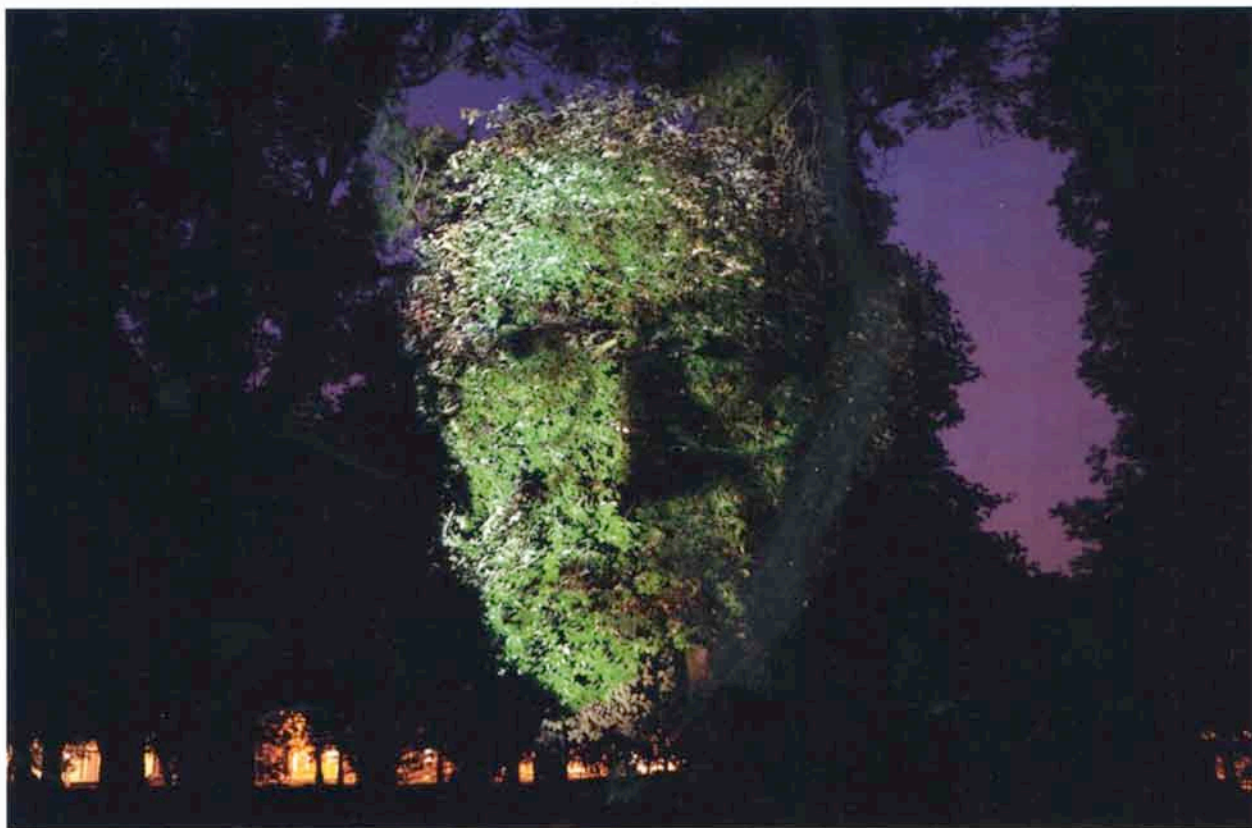
His process, in fact, relies heavily on the spoken and written word. For example, he based the language in *Influence Machine* on the way psychics speak to the dead. And during the creation of *Vox Vernacular*, Oursler collected dozens of documents dealing with invented language: about magic, the occult, sci-fi, and psychology. In a twist on traditional narrative flow, the book moves in reverse chronology, beginning with Oursler’s ambitious

installations from recent years and progressing backward to his early video work in the 1970s.

Often, the different figures in Oursler’s installations speak at the same time. To achieve the effect of overlapping dialogue, the book’s designers experimented with typefaces and spatial arrangements to distinguish between the many characters. “That’s why I called it *Vox Vernacular*—it’s about the voice,” Oursler says. “I’m not looking for high poetry.”

On May 21, an event at the New York Public Library will celebrate the book with performances by Oursler’s friends and collaborators, including **Kim Gordon**, **Tony Conrad**, **Constance DeJong**, **Brandon Olson**, and **Joe Gibbons**, who will give readings from the texts.

—Ali Pechman



Tony Oursler's *Influence Machine*, 2000, was projected on the grounds of London's Tate Modern last year.