

METRO PICTURES

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whitewall



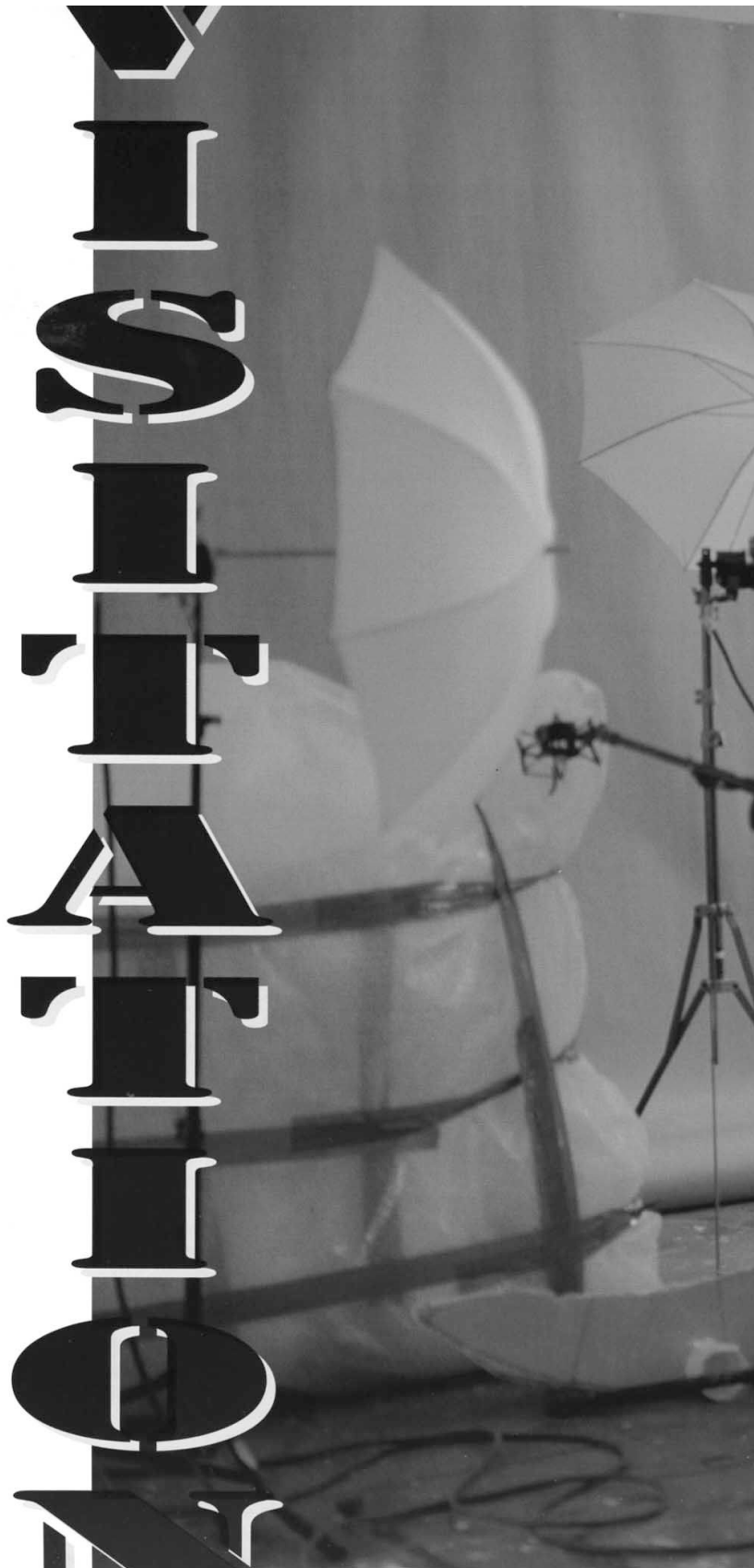
THE UNSEEN WORLD OF CONTEMPORARY ART

FOURTH ISSUE

NO SMELL OF
SULPHUR, BUT
DISEMBODIED
EYES, BODY PARTS,
OTHERWORLDLY
MUTTERINGS,
WHINES, AND
LAMENTS:
TONY OURSLER'S
STUDIO
IS A FEARFUL
LANDSCAPE WHERE
SPECTRAL
CREATURES
COME VISIT THE
BELIEVER'S MIND.
WE ASKED CARLO
McCORMICK, HIS
LONGTIME FRIEND,
TO PART
THE RED VELVET.
TONY GLADLY
BROKE HIS
MAGICIAN'S OATH
TO REVEAL THE
MODEST MEANS
BEHIND THE
MIGHTY OZ.
SECRECY IS DEAD,
BUT THE WONDER
IS STILL HERE ...

BY
CARLO McCORMICK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JAKE WALTERS



NO S T A T E M E N T



*TONY OURSLER's apparition
in his Manhattan studio*



“I HAD TO COME UP WITH A TRICK, TO FOOL MYSELF, SOMEHOW FORGET ABOUT THAT WHOLE LONG HISTORY OF PAINTING”

I'M WALKING DOWN TO TONY OURSLER'S HOUSE, a mere five blocks away from my own. It's odd how in these few vestigial margins of Manhattan yet to be homogenized such a short distance can demark two distinctly different neighborhoods; amazing that—being so far east—we're close when we're otherwise not near much else. And rather embarrassing, considering we're pals, that it's probably been more than a year since my last visit.

On one of those lovely afternoons that reminds one of summer even if the fall art season has given the city life a manic kind of cultural urgency, the artist is not busy in the studio but stands outside, watching his son Jack cavorting in the playground across the street. He and his wife, the painter Jacqueline Humphries, are keeping a close eye on young Jack as he has recently suffered one of those random lessons in gravity that make even the most laissez-faire of parents shudder. Playtime over, the family returns to their roost in a former Hebrew schoolhouse, and while Oursler and Humphries continue their domestic duties upstairs, we begin to prow for evidence around the ground-floor studio.

In the few moments it takes Tony to come downstairs I've hardly checked out the art, having been far too busy examining the shelves of antiquarian delights this bibliophile of the bizarre has amassed. Row upon row of dusty old tomes—mostly first editions dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of books (so esoteric that we may assume that few have been reprinted—it's a veritable devil's lexicon of magic, sex, religion, occultism, demonology, spiritualism, and the like. “I'm into some strange research,” Tony admits. “I like people trying to construct new universes, how their ideas were rejected by everybody in society, science, and religion.” And by the time he starts going on about a total freak like William Crookes, who invented the vacuum tube and went on to dedicate his energy to measuring psychic phenomena, you know that we're not talking about magic or books anymore—we're really talking about the shadow of a doubt in which Oursler's art continuously lurks.

Oursler's affection for and obsession with this esoteric arcana,—primary stuff which he says is “so hard to get

because it's totally wack job,”—constitute an inventory of disused scientific journals from that period when you could see “how hard people worked to prove their ideas.”

Oursler freely admits that the resulting detritus of improbable machines, hokey images, and spilled ectoplasm has inspired his work over the past three years. More than mere artistic material, these ineffectual attempts at the ineffable constitute a direct lineage to the meaning and purpose of contemporary art, in particular his preferred medium of video. Collecting stereoptical slides and spirit photography these days, Tony is shocked by how “the art world just doesn't get it.” Remembering how on a recent trip to Europe when he showed a batch of his latest prize catches to a gallery he works with how they stared in utter disbelief at him and these so obviously fake documents of the paranormal. Looking to me for confirmation, Tony emphasizes, “They work with artists like Cindy [Sherman]. How can they not get it?” For Oursler, these forbidden and subsequently forgotten images speak to a time “before things were proven to be part of a unified, normal world—which we know it is not.” He not only draws the obvious connection between charlatans, scams, and artistic practice, but is also deeply concerned with locating that exact point where the suspension on belief occurs.



It is on the subject of spiritualism where it gets a bit too personal and even impolite to pretend it's merely a matter of aesthetics. The subject of religion quite naturally provokes the gag reflex for most of us in the art world—don't those fanatics think we're going to hell anyway? But for Tony Oursler, whose art comes directly from a profound void of disbelief, his own fascination is directed by the familial issues of his paternal grandfather and his father (whose names he and Jack share that we might put a III and a IV after their







own) having made their mark on our culture as, respectively, author of *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, long-time editor of *True Story* magazine, and the founding editor of *Angels on Earth*, a magazine about divine interventions. (The first Fulton Oursler — one of master illusionist Harry Houdini's cohort — helped him publish investigations of the spiritualists.)

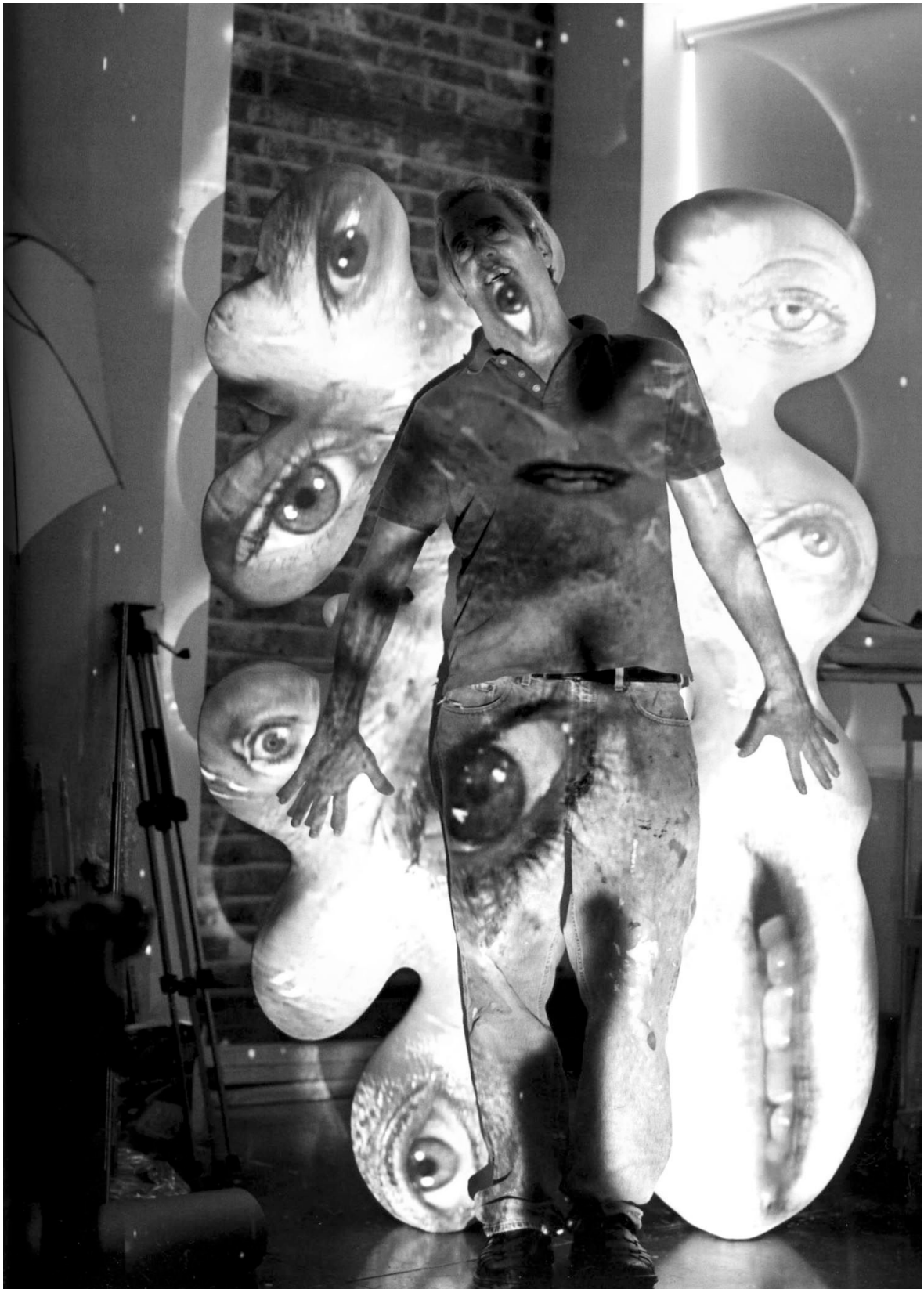
This is more than mere lapsed-Catholic guilt and all that. Tony's not trying to cathartically work out his issues with religion; our web of superstitions compels him precisely because it is so unbelievable. It's not a scrutiny of the rational so much as a very deliberate exploration of non-rational experience. The phenomenology of our collective and persistent need to believe is what engages this art. Its semblance to apparition is hardly so specific as to be about any one belief but rather becomes a visual language with which Oursler pushes the viewer into the psychic mindspace where the intangible maintains a visceral presence. "I'm no as interested in making images as I am in creating psychological states for the viewer that are almost extraneous to the object."

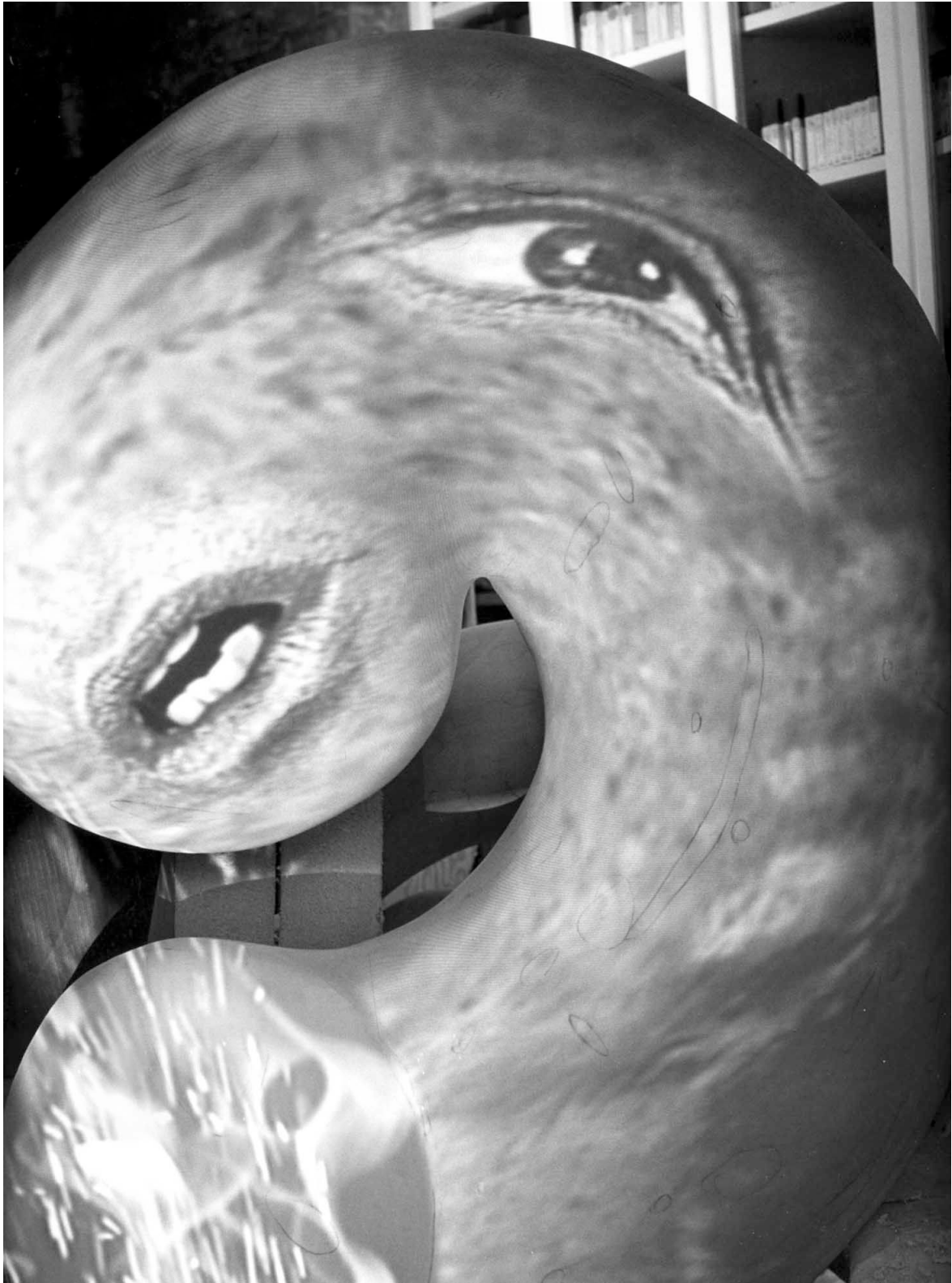
Seeing is believing, so they say. Tony short-circuits the experiential understanding of things by finding a visual equivalent where feeling replaces seeing in this equation. When he first got caught up in all this huckster-mystical material, Oursler couldn't believe how everyone else wasn't as mesmerized as he was. His work then — particularly his

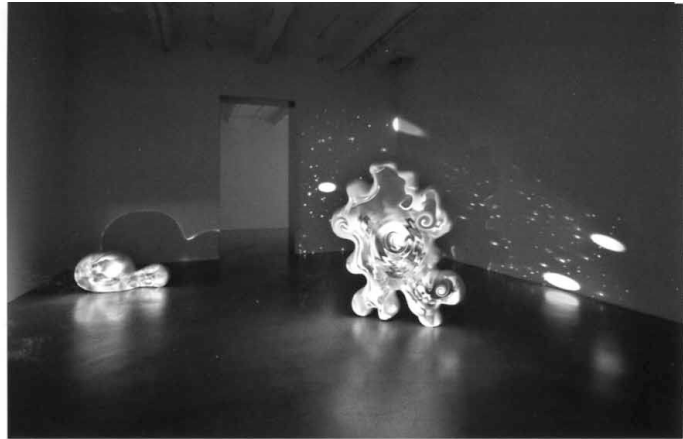
millennial projects, an epic timeline for MoMA and a major public art installation, *The Influence Machine* — was rife with such references, but now Tony admits that the more he got into it, the more he noticed that "people's eyes started glazing over." All the better, because Oursler works best with open-ended enigma — the mass of information subservient to the subsuming force of perceptual effect. This critical disjunction between cause and effect is in fact intrinsic to Oursler's creative process. Concerned with the frisson between image culture and what he calls the "dream spaces" where his art operates, Tony knows just enough (or is it too much?) to comprehend how ultimately it is all about forgetting.

Not the usual selective amnesiac typical of our contemporary culture, Tony Oursler shelves sources, precedent, and knowledge because he knows that any real journeyer must at some point put down the maps to find a place of his own. Reflecting on his mid-career breakthrough work, which changed him as much as it did our cultural landscape, Oursler explains, "When I started doing projections on the dummies, for me it was all about finding some way to get outside that whole history of figurative art and sculpture." Similarly, for his latest body of work in which he's begun mining the abstract color-field properties of his medium to create hybrid video-paintings, he admits that "I had to come up with a trick, to fool myself, knowing that the only way I could do this was to somehow forget about that whole long

✦
Tony Oursler
...
The Influence
2000
Madison Square
New York
Courtesy of the artist







▲ **Tony Oursler**

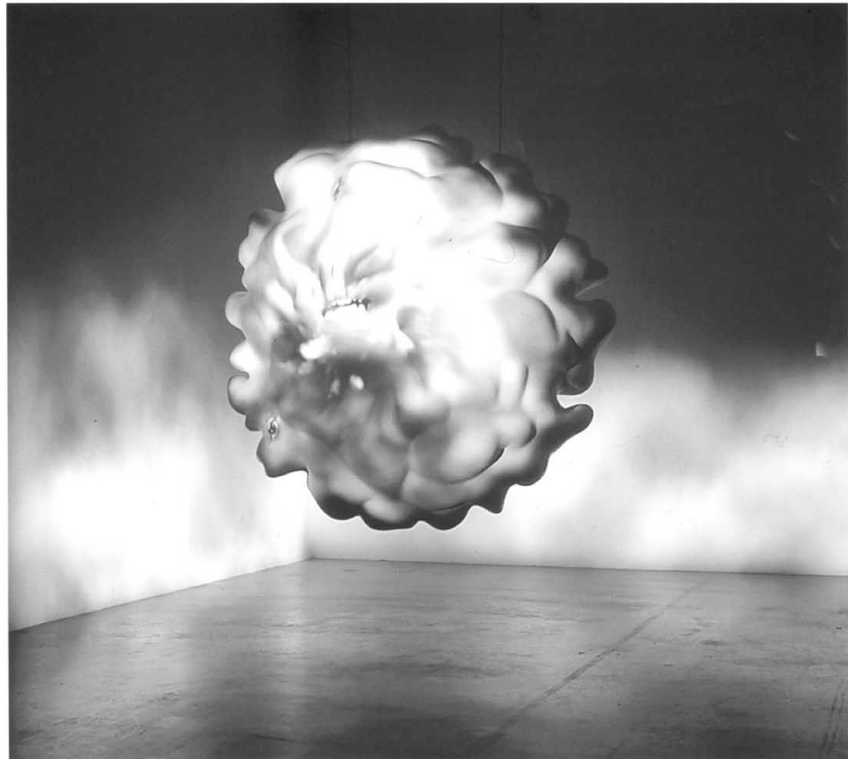
...
Mercury
 2006
 2 fiberglass sculptures
 and 3 video projectors
 Bigger piece
 69 x 57 x 22 inches
 Smaller piece
 23^{1/2} x 47 x 24 inches
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Metro Pictures, NY

▲ **Tony Oursler**

...
Dust
 2006
 Fiberglass sculpture
 and 3 video projectors
 72 x 72 x 72 inches
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Metro Pictures, NY

▼ **Tony Oursler**

...
Nix
 2006
 Fiberglass sculpture
 and 3 projectors
 67 x 64 x 50 inches
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Metro Pictures, NY



history of painting.” This becomes a mighty formal conversation for an artist whose capacity to consistently take us places we’ve never been — or perhaps intensify the familiarity of emotional commonalities so that their uneasiness must be foreign — but Oursler’s abiding concerns with technical issues and process are super-analytical. They form the structural basis from which he can employ his most improvisational tendencies. “Process goes only so far as the end product,” he tells us. “It’s about how you get there, so improvisation works with perfectionism as a way of tricking yourself into making something. Every medium is a medium unto itself — that’s what they do — so to wed video to an object or a picture plane is always going to present a challenge.”



country, sadly, we’re perpetually at war. My work reflects the highs and lows as I see them and live them” Tony explains. Next time you stop in your tracks transfixed by some Oursler piece where an unblinking eye reflects the image of some nasty splatter movie on a TV screen, or a face morphs in wild contortions of emotional distress, perhaps it might occur to you that, humanist that he is, Tony Oursler sees subject and audience as not unlike a fly to toy with. “I was a really pissed-off guy at some level when I was younger,” Tony shrugs, adding however that it was “always with a good sense of humor. I was a natural for punk rock when it came along, so for me making art was no different from singing in a punk band.” That coupling of humor and horror is perhaps the generational bond that links us — hopefully not too off now that we’re loving family men or living by another code of political correctness. “I’m still like that,” he contends. “I continue to feed off of some perverse energy and believe that art does come from dissatisfaction — that it’s always going to be for me an extreme reaction to the culture. But you can’t really get pissed off unless you actually care, so as an artist, I make things out of that energy, and I have to remind myself that it’s not just destructive but also a kind of idealism.”

On cue, just when we’ve got Tony reliving his dubious past, a ray of utterly divine innocence comes crashing into the studio. Master Jack can smell a good time and wants to play. His latest venture as one of Oursler’s busy studio assistants involves assembling the various detritus of his dad’s increasingly more elaborate sculptural installation projects and constructing his own jungle gym. Yes, not too different from mom Jacqueline Humphries’s radical efforts to reinvent and reinvigorate the guts of abstract painting, or Tony’s constant groping towards a new context for video, Jack already understands that these things are indeed exercises in problem-solving. Energized by such youth, with the fumes of punk nihilism still lingering in the air, and knowing that unless he’s totally clear I’ll get it all wrong, Oursler returns to this problematic relationship he and other artists must forge with history. “People don’t even know who invented that thing”, he declares, pointing to the television set that has otherwise sat unnoticed like the most mundane furniture before us all this time. Sure, and they don’t know how nuts the guy responsible for the cathode ray tube that made this all possible actually was. But that’s just his point: “When you had all this stuff arriving at us at once — electricity, the moving image, telegraphs, flying, and so on — you believed in possibility. Art, science, and mysticism could coexist in ways that are impossible now that we’ve divorced them from

“WHAT I LIKE ABOUT BEING A VIDEO ARTIST IS IT HAS NO HISTORY REALLY

Maybe it was all that dancing around the subject of religion, or just the wading into the prosaic issues of problem-solving and structure best left to better minds than mine, but it occurred to me that there are aspects of Tony’s work too easy to ignore when you take it so seriously. A couple of years ago, when Oursler was busy preserving and cataloguing all the work he did before he got famous, he showed me a one-minute video he made as a student in which he tortured an ordinary housefly. Sorry, but I think it was funny and sick in the best way — and still do. And as different as this juvenile bit of mischief may have been from his more celebrated work since the ’90s, what it has in common with his oeuvre as a whole is a degree of unmitigated cruelty. “We live in a cruel

one another. What I like about being a video artist is it has no history really. I can’t tell you how liberating it was for me when somebody from the film school just dumped an old 1967 Portapak camera in the art department. Suddenly I could get inside of that tube instead of just frying my brain in front of it.” Right on, buddy, but really you should get your kid on video games. Busy builder Jack has just picked up an adult-sized hammer and is lifting it over his head for the next crucial stroke in his master plan. All right, we’ve been having fun but it’s getting late, we breeders have got dinners and bedtime stories to attend to. I’ve got to run too, but I promise Tony, we’ll do that playdate soon. **W**

