

DIRECTIONS

Tony Oursler: Video Dolls with Tracy Leipold

July 2–September 7, 1998



Let's Switch, 1996, mixed media with video projection; performance by Tracy Leipold.
17 x 11 x 14 in. (43.2 x 27.9 x 35.6 cm), plus equipment. The Eli Broad Family Foundation,
Santa Monica.

Video is like water, this completely ethereal form that's been boxed for forty years in the television.

Tony Oursler (*Flash Art*, 1996)

It's an imitation of something I've heard, my imagining what it would be like.

Tracy Leipold (*Parkett*, 1996)

Tony Oursler's figures with the projected face of performance artist Tracy Leipold create an intense viewing experience. The six works in this exhibition rivet us, make us laugh, embarrass us, and involve us in deep psychological distress. We want to leave but remain transfixed. Thrift-store props entrap the figures; undisguised video equipment exposes them. Pulsating and noisy despite their inertness, these video dolls disturb the peaceful respite of an art museum, invoking instead a psychiatric unit, a freak show, a living-history exhibit gone awry.

Leipold has appeared as Oursler's "model" in some fifty video-animated sculptures since 1993. Through his work, she has become a kind of movie director's favorite female lead in an era of artistic expression attuned to chameleon personalities such as those of photographer Cindy Sherman. Leipold's video personae evolve in concert with one artist's vision as he tries new themes and combinations of materials. Oursler's visceral, multi-leveled fusion of sculpture, video, and performance art marries well with Leipold's gifts on camera.

Working with Leipold and perhaps twenty other performers, Oursler has used live-action projections to animate not just heads but also canvases, screens, bouquets, jarred specimens, and cloudlike wads of cotton, among

other objects. This approach—together with other, space-altering video installations such as Gary Hill's murmuring apparitions, Bill Viola's body dissipations, and Sam Taylor-Wood's wrap-around psychodramas—has expanded the parameters of video art in the 1990s. Projection-based work has liberated the genre from a necessary but perhaps limiting reliance on the television monitor.

Oursler and Leipold met in 1993, when the New York-based Oursler, his career already well launched as a video artist, was developing a nonverbal, emotive series for which he needed a person who could "cry upon command" (*Written Conversation*, 1996). Although a relatively "green" twenty-eight, the Iowa-raised and -educated Leipold had studied the Meisner technique at the Actors Institute in New York and was working for the Wooster Group, a theater collective with roots in the transmedia, free-form experiments of the Fluxus artists in the 1960s. Introduced by composer/musician Stephen Vitiello, Oursler and Leipold developed an immediate rapport.

Performance has long been a key element in Oursler's work. A product of John Baldessari's all-media "post-studio" movement at the California Institute of the Arts in the late 1970s—where installation artist Jonathan Borofsky and musician/performer Laurie Anderson were two of his teachers—Oursler spent most of the next decade in his native New York devising and videotaping expressionist playlets about madness, desperation, and the pressures of contemporary pop culture. He also created synthesized music and collaborated on performances and post-punk rock events as part of an art-savvy East Village scene. Oursler spent most of 1985 in Paris, exhibiting a multichannel installation at the Centre Georges Pompidou. By 1988, when he

moved from New York to the Boston area for a teaching position, he was developing metaphorical sculptures on toxicity; he soon began to hone in on the figure.

The artist became fascinated with "how the average person might make a figure if they had to, for instance, a farmer and a scarecrow, a kid on Halloween, a dummy, an angry crowd and an effigy" and started making headless dummies using cast-off clothes. In his studio, he struggled to make a head using rubber masks, hand-painted images, even collages, but each new face "seemed to destroy [the dummies'] magical effect" (*Written Conversation*, 1996). The solution came almost by accident in 1991, when Oursler noted that the compact Fujix P40U LCD Mini Video projector with audio speakers had come onto the



Submerged (detail), 1995–96, mixed media with video projection; performance by Tracy Leipold. 53 x 11 x 11 in. (134.6 x 27.9 x 27.9 cm), plus equipment. Private collection.

market. Projecting his own performing face and those of others on blank, cloth-covered ovoid "screens," the artist launched a series of rambling, life-size dummy figures acting out archetypal fantasy films. His next "sublingual" works brought him to Leipold.

"Tracy's face is her instrument," Oursler frequently says. The performer first studies and discusses with the artist his script and the general configuration of his intended piece. As with Oursler's other performers, Leipold's "stage" in the artist's storefront studio is a small stand with an oval opening for her head, surrounded by black cloth. The artist directs and prompts her for ten- to fifteen-minute takes and determines the cycle's dynamic. He is mindful that the finished sculpture showing Leipold's distorted face should neither bore nor hold the viewer captive.

In *Hysterical*, 1993, Leipold sobs in silence pierced by an occasional shriek, maniacal laughter, and a studio-roaming dog's bark. Held aloft on a lighting stand, this tiny stuffed puppet doll is as terminally helpless as a prisoner immobilized on a spike or the deformed infant in David Lynch's film *Eraserhead* (1977), which Oursler has cited as an influence. The work is also an ominous recasting of Nam June Paik's monitor-pondering TV *Buddha*, 1974: the camera watches yet creates the subject, or does it point like a gun?

Submerged, 1995–96, from a series in which the artist himself has also performed, at first seems plain funny—a one-line "sick" joke perhaps—but it soon unleashes deep anxiety. Projected onto a ceramic ovoid in a fish tank, Leipold's face is lit blue, grunting and looking around the room, doomed to eternal holding of breath. Arousing deep empathy—who doesn't fear running out of breath while underwater?—she is a Brancusi sleeping

muse awakened to airless hell, Sartre's *No Exit* on a pedestal.

Sad ruminations permeate *I Want to Be You*, 1996, in which a doll talks to no one in particular but emits a palpable feeling of one-to-one intimacy. Inside a green trunk, against bright red fabric, the stuffed figure states wistfully, "I want to know you," the first of many statements of envy. "My life is not my own," it moans. "Don't look at me. You're the one who needs help!" it snaps. A wailing "Oh, the pain!" is followed by wicked laughter. This snake-pit doll is more than depressed; it is off balance.

The piece's dysfunctional aura is intentional. Since 1995 the artist has been fascinated with Multiple Personality Disorder (M.P.D.), using patients' poems, case histories, and therapy-session transcriptions to develop scripts for his works. Although M.P.D. is popularly believed to be legitimate—as portrayed in such films as *The Three Faces of Eve* (1958) and *Sybil* (1976), the latter about a woman with sixteen personalities—specialists now feel it may not be a clinical disease but rather a contemporary form of hysteria exacerbated by media culture. Oursler revels in the possibility that TV's blizzard of images could create an identifiable psychiatric condition. Even Leipold says she may subliminally be referring to characters on TV when she's performing (*Parkett*, 1996).

In the disquieting *Energy*, 1996, a big-headed, deflated body is dead weight across waiting-room chairs, its arms creating a sort of cage, like a 1950s polio victim in an iron lung. Part of an M.P.D.-related series for which Oursler asked Leipold to invent different voices, the figure flips from scratchy baying sheep to high-pitched baby. Eyes look around the room ("Left, right, up, down"), advice is given ("Become vividly aware of your envi-

ronment"), and a mantric "Let go! Let go! Let go!" becomes a blood-curdling scream. Energy is skewed.

In *Let's Switch*, 1996, theatrically lit red and green flannel-covered dolls are comic Siamese twins eyeing each other with "Valley Girl" indignance ("I'm going to close my eyes and wait for you to leave") and flippant sarcasm ("I'm ready. Bring on the pain"). Shelved like a child's toys, these rubber-faced alter egos embody classic adult issues: inner conflict, personality clash, and love-hate ambivalence. Oursler wrote their scripts side by side, and although he directed each of Leipold's characters with the other in mind, their interactions didn't play out until final editing.

Oursler splits the Leipold personality farther apart in *Side Effects*, 1998, on view here for the first time. Its candelabra-like presentation of five heads—composited images made by editing on a single tape (but not through multiple lenses, as a layperson might think)—has a hypnotic effect akin to Paik's video flags. Its power to overload and stupefy recalls the work of Bruce Nauman, whom Oursler has cited as an influence.

Oursler's sculptures with Leipold expose and confront the injured human psyche and life's tenuous hold. Curiously, Oursler's grandfather wrote *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1949), a popular book about Christ, and his father edits a magazine on angels. The Oursler-Leipold video dolls are spiritual at their core, opening windows into a collective soul profoundly challenged by the media age.

Sidney Lawrence
Organizing Curator

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Hysterical, 1993, mixed media with video projection; performance by Tracy Leipold. 57¹/₂ x 11 x 7 in. (146 x 27.9 x 17.8 cm), plus equipment. Lois and Richard Plehn.

BIOGRAPHIES

Tony Oursler Born May 19, 1957, New York. Received B.F.A., California Institute for the Arts, 1979. Has been featured in solo and group shows in Europe, North America, and Asia since the 1980s, and in European retrospectives, 1995-96 (see *Tony Oursler*, Frankfurt: Portikus) and 1997-98. Since 1996 has had first solo American museum shows of video figures in Honolulu, San Diego, Philadelphia, and Aspen. In 1997 participated in the Whitney Museum Biennial. Lives in New York.

Tracy Leipold Born August 17, 1965, Peoria, Illinois. Studied at University of Iowa, Iowa City, 1984-88, and Actors Institute, New York, 1990-92. In New York, solo performances since 1990 have been at Dia Center for the Arts, the Kitchen, Wooster Group, VOID, and St. Marks Church. Performed for Dia's CD-Rom/Website project, 1995, with Oursler and others; has also acted with Ontological Hysteric Theater, New York. Lives in New York.

INTERVIEWS CITED IN TEXT

"In the Green Room: Tony Oursler and Tracy Leipold in Conversation with Louise Neri." *Parkett* 47 (1996): 21-28.

Ritchie, Matthew. "Tony Oursler: Technology as an Instinct Amplifier." *Flash Art* (January-February 1996): 76-79.

Written Conversation between Tony Oursler and Christiane Meyer-Stoll. San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All works are mixed media with video projection; performances by Tracy Leipold. Dimensions do not include equipment.

Hysterical, 1993, 57 1/2 x 11 x 7 in. (146 x 27.9 x 17.8 cm). Lois and Richard Plehn.

Submerged, 1995-96, 53 x 11 x 11 in. (134.6 x 27.9 x 27.9 cm). Private collection.

Energy, 1996, 31 x 61 1/2 x 29 in. (78.7 x 156.2 x 73.7 cm). Rebecca and Alexander Stewart, Seattle.

I Want to Be You, 1996, 12 x 30 x 15 in. (30.5 x 76.2 x 38.1 cm). Ronald and Linda F. Daitz.

Let's Switch, 1996, 17 x 11 x 14 in. (43.2 x 27.9 x 35.6 cm). The Eli Broad Family Foundation, Santa Monica.

Side Effects, 1998, 68 1/2 x 22 3/4 x 9 1/2 in. (174 x 57.8 x 24.1 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

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Energy, 1996, mixed media with video projection; performance by Tracy Leipold. 31 x 61 1/2 x 29 in. (78.7 x 156.2 x 73.7 cm), plus equipment. Rebecca and Alexander Stewart, Seattle.