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Pharmakon: From Body to Being

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Visual Arts
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Abstract

This thesis dossier is separated into the following distinct sections: an extended artist statement; a portfolio documenting artworks made during my MFA candidacy resulting in my exhibit *Pharmakon:* Acts, Traces, and Maps (at Satellite Gallery); and a case study of artist Tony Oursler, whose video and multimedia installations explore the psychological and social relationships between individuals and technologies. Together, they present my exploration of the body's 'power of acting,' or *potentia agendi,* in relation to the modificatory capacity of technology, or *affectus*, on the human body. In particular, I investigate the body's habits, or capacity for habit-building, what Bourdieu calls *habitus,* and the interconnection between the body and its digital environment, *digitus habitus*. My installations are built around photographic and video media with which I designed 'interfacial installations' to allow audience members to engage directly with the disruptive and entropic effects of digital technologies, ranging from cellphone displays to *spam,* and view the development of so-called digital *personas,* part of my catalogue of technologically-inspired gestures, habits, and faces. The political consequences of the influence of technology are explored in the context of developing resistance to the panoptical interface of technology, a process of mass surveillance and data-harvesting which defines our contemporary relationship with technology. I term *pharmakonic* those gestures, or technologies, which can offer *both* further disruption and an opportunity for *recircuit*, in which the socio-mechanical agency of the body is rewired away from the addictive, decay-driven habits of digital technology towards positive, "negenthropic"[1] habits.

Keywords: Technology, Body, Being, entropy, recircuit, negentropy, resistance, censor, sensor, control, disobedience, *Affectus*, Continuous Variation, *Potentia Agendi*, *Habitus*, Behaviour, Panopticon, Catopticon, rhizopticon, spamopticon, anxiety, drawing, photography, video, installation, performance.

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[1] This term is ambiguously used as "negative entropy" in Schrödinger's What is life? and "negenthropy" in Stiegler's writings, signifying generally the opposite of entropy. Stiegler creates a neologism with two words:negentropy and Anthropocene.

Lay Summary

The crossroad between body/gesture dispositions/processes and our interaction with new technologies is the main focus of my thesis and installations. I explore Bernard Stiegler's notion of *Pharmakon*, or *Pharmakonic* gestures, which views technological and social change as involving negative, disruptive transformations of the body's habits/being, which offer simultaneously opportunities for positive recircuits and resistance through the possibility of creating new habits and gestures. My installations explore through photographic and video media the move of the body into its habits, and, in particular, the move from the body as a strict mechanical interface to its existence as a living, social agent. I call this the move from body to being, which under titles my thesis. In my work, I explore a variety of questions: How does a technological determined habit come about? How does a habit break down through entropy? Could recircuiting an anxious habit create a new habit through resistance, or 'civil disobedience'? My installations allow the audience member's body to explore the effects of technology directly, while my *extended artist statement* is my attempt to formalize these effects and define the mobility of the body both mechanically and politically.

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Comprehensive Artist Statement

The hopeless dream of being. Not seeming, but being.
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Introduction

Pharmakon is an ancient and paradoxical Greek word. It can be translated as 'drug,' meaning both 'remedy' and 'poison.' Technologies and the digital world are, like drugs, highly addictive and stimulating, and may either have a positive or a negative effect on our bodies, or may act as both a remedy and a poison as Bernard Stiegler argues. For Stiegler, ''the question is always to turn the poison into a cure… to make what produces a local increase in entropy its opposite, a new neganthropic factor.''[2] Bernard Stiegler also advances that innovations are destructive and negative. Is it possible, then, to rethink digital innovations so that they can be rewired towards something positive?

When the first smartphones appeared in Paris, one could find people changing their bodily behaviours in public spaces during network losses. These new bodily contortions made me laugh, and triggered in me the desire to pursue this line of research. I became interested in the crossroad between body/gesture dispositions/processes and our interaction with new technologies.

In my final thesis exhibition entitled *Pharmakon*: *Acts*, *Traces*, *and Maps*[3], I try to open the possibility of detecting and recircuiting these gestures in a subversive way. Using my body generically, I record my movements in stop motion and re-enact these new digital

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[2] Bernard Stiegler,"La philosophie et la vie: La voie néguentropique," February 13, 2020, France Culture Paris, Radio, 30 min. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/a-voix-nue/bernard-stiegler-45-la-voie-neguentropique
[3] The notion of *Pharmakon* inspired the title of my show held at the Satellite Gallery, from December 7th to December 12th, 2020.

habits. The sequential images become short films, capturing processes of repetition, exaggeration, disruption, *détournement*, drawing, multilayering, compositing, video montage, extraction, photographic transfer, prop building, and installations.

Pharmakon: from Body to Being retraces the corporeal ebb and flow of distortion and negation as the body undergoes these processes. In the first part I will present, through my project *Maps & Mazes*, the technologically determined birth of a habit. In the second part, through the projects *Self-[S]ensored* and the trilogy *Maps*/*Amps*/*Pams*, I will investigate how entropy appears *through* our digital habits. Lastly, through my project *Joy-Jitsu*, I will show how a new habit can be created, through what we might call an act of civil disobedience.

1. Birth of a Habit

1.1 *Vis Extendi, Potentia Agendi*

In my first installation, *Maps & Mazes*[4], I try to imagine ways of uncovering and mapping how the body is mediated. In development, I sought, firstly, to place my body in a closed-circuit to maximize the interaction of my body and the given circuit. Secondly, I developed a means by which my body could unconsciously register the effect upon it by the circuit during the interaction. My regular bus trips to and from my university served as a closed-circuit, with the interior of the bus providing a self-contained, reasonably isolated environment in which my body could be subject to the movement of the bus. With pencil and paper in hand, I would let my body rock back and forth to the rhythmic cadence of the bus route, externalizing the relationship between the movement of the bus and the movement of my body.

A strange paradox is seen in this work, where the machine, or mechanical technology

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[4] Jérôme Conquy, Photographe Plasticien, https://jeconquy.wixsite.com/monsite/mapsandmazes (accessed December 15, 2020).

(the bus), that creates the drawing by constraining my body to follow its movement, triggers a mechanical drawing *through me* as if I were myself an automated machine and not a human. The body when overridden by a circuited environment becomes mechanical, and the other active, conscious processes of the body and the mind become superfluous in the exchange between the body and the machine. Without any overt communication, or explicitly given rules, the drawing not only maps the mechanical, or automatic, nature of the coordinate movement between bus and body, but exposes the body's *unconscious* openness to mechanical recircuiting.

This openness is embodied in Gilles Deleuze's concept of *continuous variation*, where, in the model of Baruch Spinoza's *affectus*, or the body's openness to change and modulation, "there is a continuous variation—and this is what it means to exist—of the force of existing or of the power of acting."[5] One finds, further, in Spinoza's term *potentia agendi*[6] that with ideas, or what we might call mechanics/modulations of the physical body, "it is less we who have the ideas than the ideas which are affirmed in us."[7] The drawing allows us to visualize the subconscious coherence and mechanicity of mechanical technology's effect on the body, and the reliance of our body's *potentia agendi* on its own openness to continuous variation. The interconnected lines, tracing different circuits and movements, traversions and intersections, capture this variation and expose its continuousness in the movement and circularization of its loops.

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[5] Gilles Deleuze, "A Thousand Plateaus III: Continuous Variation, Lecture 12, Affect and Idea," 24 January 1978, University of Paris, Vincennes-ST. Denis, trans. by Timothy S. Murphy (for Web Deleuze), augmented transcript by Charles J. Stivale. https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/seminars/thousand-plateaus-iii-continuous-variation/lecture-12 (accessed March 7, 2021).

[6] Power of acting, or, more generally, free will. In Deleuze and Spinoza, the power or potential to do something is not grounded in will alone, but in the relationship of your will with your bodily capacities. To increase one's power to do something, one must, in other words, go through the body, where the link between our individual agency and wider reality sits.

[7] Deleuze, Ibid.

1.2 *Digitus Habitus*

The notion of *habitus*, a term popularized by Pierre Bourdieu comprises socially ingrained habits, skills, and psychological and behavioural dispositions that forge an individual perception and reaction to their surrounding social world. The body for Bourdieu is the recipient of mimetic social historical norms such as postures or accents, and also more abstract mental habits such as schemes of perceptions, feeling and actions. He calls this *hexis*.[8]

In *habitus*, the body's agency is fulfilled only in its encounter with something else, with an *opus operatum* "in which all thought and action reveals itself."[9] This can be an encounter with technology, such as a tool, or with a social practice, in which the ground rules for action, or *modus operandi*, are given through the mechanics, or structure, of the given tool or process. This interfacial relationship is "a fertile nexus"[10] between two worlds, body and habitus. The body interacts with a mechanical technology or a social practice, within which resides a *habitus*, and the "systems of durable, transposable dispositions"[11] that define the *habitus* adapt the body to change.

Digital technologies, specifically informational media, alter the body into something existing "not so much as flesh and blood but as an informatics database."[12] The body *in*-habits the mechanical and digital processes, which regulate digital informational databases, whose *affects* change and determine it. Algorithms, specifically, control the operations of the digital space and, in controlling it, control the body's relationship with digital technology. The resultant recircuit is one where the body's mental decision-making processes are tied to huge

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[8] Christopher B. Germann, *Bourdieu's Habitus & Hexis*, https://cognitive-liberty.online/bordieus-habitus-hexis/ (accessed February 27, 2021).
[9] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory in Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 18.
[10] François Dagognet, *Faces, Surfaces, Interfaces* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1982), 49.
[11] Bourdieu, 72.
[12] Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 112. https://ebookcentral-proquest com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/lib/west/reader.action?docID=1174337 (accessed February 13th, 2021).

informational databases, which require the same complex algorithms to navigate (e.g. Google search). The body becomes linked to digital technologies that have no internal agency and whose ground rules, or *modus operandi*[13], cannot be ascertained except in the dissection of complex, fundamentally invisible, mathematical modelling. The decision-making processes of the body, both mental and physical, are rewired as the body begins to rely on emotional cues and signals to navigate digital spaces, while the mind begins to search aggressively for narrativizing patterns, which may allow it to analyze the oversupply of digital information. Furthermore, the body begins to navigate with digital technologies through the short-circuit of emotion and pleasure, exemplified in Alexander Galloway's concept of "informatics pleasure,"[14] which are the only forms of *automatic*, processual agency that remain open to the body upon its interface with *digitus habitus*. Without emotion and pleasure, the body would be forced to face the abyss of digital algorithms about which it knows nothing and which it cannot alter or amend.

1.3 *Narcissus*

The interfacial mode of *digitus habitus* is invisible, because digital processes are increasingly invisible and imperceptible. Environments, generally, working in view of undetectable variations and structures, "are [also] invisible, their ground rules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns elude easy perception."[15] Contemporary digital interfaces avoid detection by giving us back our own self-image, reflected in the purchases, online clicks, and digital content consumption which algorithms re-feed to us in an attempt to try and repeatedly predict, ascertain, and, ultimately, determine, our desires. Imagine *Narcissus'* pool of water in which he obsesses over his own self-image. Can we not also imagine that the pool of water is a digital interface, which, in place of the physical process of the reflection of light and the depth of the water, algorithmic digital processes produce an electronic image of us, a blueprint or a map of our *online activity*, our online presence? As Marshall McLuhan writes,

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[13] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 72.
[14] Galloway, 32.
[15] Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage-An inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam, 1967), 84-85.

"...environments are not passive wrappings, but are rather active processes..."[16]

1.4 Pharmakonic Gestures, *or* Schrödinger's cat

In my second installation, *Self-[S]ensor*[17], I try to visualize how a living, breathing human body interacts with an *imagined* digital space. Using my body generically, I developed a performance, which used gestures germane to interactions with mechanical and digital technology *gone wrong*. These gestures act as an expressive visualization of the internal effect of *digitus habitus*, and, upon being photographed and then sequenced in a video, these gestural expressions rise to the level of a performance. The video montage, furthermore, filters the performance through a gaze, embodying the sense in which our habits are circuited through an imperceptible agent, which, without our knowledge, seems to regulate our *potentia agendi*. In a way, I become a modulated automaton, a kind of digital puppet.

The video produced is placed within a black box, within which a mirror reflects the performance, redoubling and rebounding it, and a peephole is added to the box, inviting the audience to witness my performance. The peephole and the black box embody the *panoptical gaze*, in which surveillance is exercised in a vertical hierarchy. Someone watches me, and, as though my performance anticipates being watched, my anxious gestures confirm the position of authority, which my audience inadvertently takes on in viewing me. The interior of the box, meanwhile, embodies the *catoptical gaze*[18], in which surveillance is exercised in a horizontal, self-enforced hierarchy. Without any overt exercise of power, my performance embodies anxiety as a self-disciplining gesture, where the *hexis* of self-surveillance replaces traditional surveillance and 'prohibited gestures' are replaced by a closed-circuit, control space in which any kind of action is allowed so long as it doesn't exceed the bounds of the

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[16] McLuhan, 84-85.

[17] Jérôme Conquy, Photographe Plasticien, https://jeconquy.wixsite.com/monsite/self-sensored (accessed December 15, 2020).

[18] Jean-Gabriel Ganascia, "The Generalized Sousveillance Society," *Social Science information* (2010): 489-507, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249733159_The_Generalized_Sousveillance_Society#fullTextFileContent (accessed December 15, 2020).

space.

To recircuit this 'control space', or to define and redefine the dimensions of this kind of open-ended, horizontal hierarchy, one must alter the ground rules, or *modus operandi,* of the space. The *hexistic* process of anxious self-censorship exists in view of the encroaching presence of these rules, visually composed in *Self-[S]ensored* through the layering of surveillance: a performance is made from anxious gestures, these gestures are then photographed, sequenced in a film, and, finally, provided a horizontal/vertical space in which to 'surveil' the retro projection and, as my body begins to self-censor with respect to 'invisible sensors," the effect of *internalized* surveillance is exhibited.. The move from exterior to interior, from the external, vertical gaze to the internal, horizontal gaze is a *Pharmakonic* move. To invite a digital space, without *perceptible* limits, and without *visible* hierarchies of surveillance or power, is to invite a space in which the indeterminate *Pharmakon* resides, whose effect on us, like Schrödinger's cat, sealed up in its box, is ontologically indeterminate. The body's move into the digital control space involves altering the body's agency, or *potentia agendi* and opening it to the underlying mechanics and *modus operandi* of the digital space. Viewed from afar, a performance, a new *habitus* and *hexis*, is born of anxiety and self-discipline in view of the ever *unidentified* and imperceptible ground rules of the digital and technological space. My anxious performance is surveilled *without* the overt toxicity of vertical discipline and power, replaced as these overt sensors have been by a self-regulating process of anxious self-censorship (and avoidance), which arises without any obvious exercise of authority, only the slow and encroaching dissimulation of the open digital space by invisible processes of control. Controlled, structured, circumscribed, and, ultimately, rewired, this is the process of our 'continuously variable' *potentia agendi's* entry into *digitus habitus*.

2. Entropy

2.1 Spamopticon

In the first of the trilogy *Maps/Amps/Pams,* in the context of a particularly aggressive digital informatic, namely *spam*, I set about to capture spam's disruptive effect on the eye -- and, by extension, the mental and psychic processes underlying its function. The eye is our primary mechanico-bodily interface, and, in its interaction with spam, it becomes more *entropic,* more prone to decay. Why? Spam homogenizes digital information, oversupplying the eye, and by extension the brain, with meaningless, highly-repetitive, anxiety-inducing information. Spam is not a habit, it is an automated image-producing projection, which *circuits through,* or projects, its predictable and repetitive, or entropic, processes, upon the eye. The eye, meanwhile, takes on the habit of involuntarily consuming the information it is shown, lacking the option to filter all the spam that exists in digital spaces, and decays in the physical process of the retinal-aggravation. In his book, *Automatic Society*, Bernard Stiegler says, "You can calculate what is deterministic and entropic,"[19] because the systems that are prone to entropy are those that are highly automatized, probabilistic, and calculable. Systems, which eschew recircuits, change, and the improbable, decay quicker.

In development, as I tried to capture and visualize this decay, I filmed my eye as a spam-montage is projected upon it. Capturing the active, physical process of this disturbance allowed me to *re-feed* the active process of this decay back onto the audience through a projection. My eye becomes another performative object, so that two levels exist: my actual, living body undergoing the retinal disturbance and the installation itself, which re-transmits this decay. This may be called a *disruptive strategy*, which echoes Nina Zschocke's idea that interference, or disruption, extends beyond the tradition of "direct presentation and representation"[20] in art. The montage, which shifts colour and light as different spam

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[19] Anais Nony, "Bernard Stiegler on Automatic Society," The Third Rail, October 18, 2017. http://thirdrailquarterly.org/bernard-stiegler-on-automatic-society/ (accessed March 7, 2021).
[20] Nina Zschocke, cited in *Disruption, Photography, and the Idea of Aesthetic Resistance. Sophie Ristelhueber's*

advertisements are repeated and re-presented, embodies the shiftiness and indeterminacy of the *modus operandi,* or the underlying reproductive ground rules, of spam, whose otherwise indeterminate homogeneity conceals the fact that some agent or process creates and, more importantly, distributes spam en masse. Further, it resists the orientation of the piece around my eye, which only remains as an uncanny, disrupted, point of recognition. The installation, which consists in projecting the video onto a concave black geode in a dark room, resembling an eye, or the bodily space which encloses the retina, offers to transmit the entropic processes, or retinal-aggravation, of spam, "one of many dark matters of the digital world,"[21] onto my audience, exploiting any-*body* present, whether part of the installation or not, and recircuit their *potentia agendi* through the digital space of spam.

2.2 Persona

The second part of the trilogy, *Amps*[22]*,* is the transfer of the opticonical spam-projection, or *spamopticon,* onto a series of human faces, and mine. To create an assembly of digital masks or *personas*[23]*,* I filmed people undergoing the retinal-aggravation, and, in order to stabilize the effect, developed a series of photographs, small in size, which could present the digital faces, or masks. The transfer itself was made, with a gel medium, from a xerox printed image that was extracted from the videos I made. In development, I reflected on Hannah Höch's dadaist collages, which take mass media representations of the human body, cut, distort, and, then, reconfigure them in the language of photo collage. Contemporary artist Nancy Egol Nikka quotes Höch as saying, "I would like to blur the firm borders that we human beings, cocksure as we are, are inclined to erect around everything that is accessible to

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Gulf War Photographs, https://www.academia.edu/38253656/Disruption_Photography_and_the_Idea_of_Aesthetic_Resistance_Sophie_Ristelhuebers_Gulf_War_Photographs (accessed March 7, 2021).
[21] Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 161.
[22] Jérôme Conquy, Photographe Plasticien, https://jeconquy.wixsite.com/monsite/amps (accessed December 15, 2020).
[23] The psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung used the word *persona* to designate the social mask and to distinguish it from individuality, from the Self.

us."[24] Höch's technique of *juxtaposition* allowed her to visualize the destabilization, in her case, of gender boundaries, placing male and female features side-by-side, recreating faces in deformed, androgynous collages. My photographic transfers are not collages, but are made from a parallel process of juxtaposition, or confrontation of the human body with disruptive digital technologies, followed by a layering, or superimposition of images as in my installation's *spamopticon*. This simulates the effect of the body's interaction with spam. The distortion of the face through the projection of images and the process of spam-multilayering creates a kind of *photomorphic* collage or composite, which builds collage-like entities, from living, human subjects in this case, followed by an extraction of images, or photographs,. The resulting image presents, not only a distinct image of the human face, but a distinct *persona.* This is the persona, or inter-*face,* of *spamus digitus habitus*, which we may imagine circuits through each person as their face, while processing digital information, is lit up by their computer screen.

In his analysis of reflexivity in Ingmar Bergman's masterpiece *Persona,* Paul Newell Campbell writes, "we are made aware of the degree to which we had moved outside our own personae and had depended on the support of the film persona."[25] In our interaction with digital spaces, we take on a persona that is not our own, but which we gain *through* our interaction, as our body adapts and is recircuited, qua *potentia agendi,* or *affectus*, to the body-and-mind altering, decay-driven processes of the digital space. In Bergman's film, the audience members are disturbed through the way the film's two principal characters' personas "move backward and forward, now transcending, now withdrawing within their own boundaries."[26] Bergman's cinematic multi-layerings, of dream sequences and in the doubling, or intermingling, of his principal character's identities, and the *reflexive* self-interrogations of the film's form, beginning with the opening flash of the camera equipment, as though we are

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[24] Nikka Egol Nancy, "Hannah Höch," in Art of Collage September 26, 2019, https://artofcollage.wordpress.com/2019/09/26/hannah-hoch/ (accessed december 15, 2020).

[25] Paul Newell Campbell, "The Reflexive Function of Bergman's *Persona*," *Cinema Journal* 19, no. 1 (Autumn, 1979): 77.

[26] Ibid., 82.

watching a "film about film,"[27] simulate the feeling for the audience of self-transformation, and persona-blurring, which the characters undergo in the film. The process of blurring, or layering, is the persona, as opposed to the persona relating to a stable identity or end-product -- the digital space is constantly changing too. Similarly, the interaction of the *spamopticon* projection, the human face, the photographic transfer, and photo-morphic compositing, relay the disturbance of digital technology on the audience that are drawn in, in the installation. These multi-layerings try to expose how the digital persona of the *spamus habitus* exists within, or how it acts *through*, the body. After transferring the multi-layered images of the face, the photographs are arranged along a wall in the installation, inviting the audience members to register the diversity of *personas,* or inter-*faces*, drawn out in *spamus habitus,* as the body, like in its interaction with *digitus habitus*, adapts to change and variation.

2.3 Rhizopticon, *or* Anxiety as an Aphrodisiac

In the final part of the trilogy, *Pams*[28]*,* the *content* of spam, *sex,* becomes the focus. In particular, the feelings of anxiety associated with spam advertisements. How often does spam offer casual and clandestine sexual encounters, or offer to solve so-called sexual 'performative issues'? Part of the success of spam after all, in the words of Finn Brunton, is how it confronts us "...constantly with disorienting questions about what's real…"[29] *Is there something wrong with me? Am I missing something?* For this installation, I built a rhizomatic[30] assemblage: cell phones, horizontally networked through thin wires, and hung upon a flat wall, each phone running the *spamopticonic* montage. "The cell is like a contaminating hole opening into our life,"[31] says Tony Oursler, and the more it functions like

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[27] Ibid., 72.
[28] Jérôme Conquy, Photographe Plasticien, https://jeconquy.wixsite.com/monsite/pams (accessed December 15, 2020).
[29] Finn Brunton, *Spam: A shadow History of the Internet* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 199.
[30] A rhizome is a crucial term in Deleuze's philosophy, referring to a non-hierarchical root structure, extending in all possible directions equally, countering the tree-structure, which prioritizes linear verticality and hierarchy. For Deleuze, the rhizome was a critical structure for encouraging openness and possibility in systems.
[31] Tony Oursler and David Rimanelli, *High* (London: Publisher Lisson Gallery, 2008), 16.

a rhizome, that is, *pharmakonically,* producing diverse, rhizomatic formations and removing traditional forms of vertical hierarchy and any overt loss of freedom on our part, creating trust between us and digital technology and integrating it into our lives all the quicker as a result.

The *pharmakonic rhizopticon* is created when the cell phone itself becomes a sexual organ, networked through other active digital sex organs, i.e. other cellphones or active digital users, all satisfying directly what they purport to offer us by simulating it, namely sex. *Retinal sex* replaces the traditional bodily sex-act, and the *rhizopticon*, in turn, watches us as we have sex with it, like *Narcissus'* digital pool, transmitting and algorithmizing our data. My installation tries to simulate this, where the interface of cell phones' loopings of the spam-montage and the flat orientation of the cell phones on the wall draw out their variability as pieces of technology, capable of being adapted and recircuited. This process is extended as each phone, in presenting the spam-montage, induces a feeling of anxiety in the audience member who views the images. The short circuit between sexualized, digital technologies and anxiety is created as gaining sexual satisfaction involves resolving an underlying performative anxiety.

In viewing the *rhizopticon*, the audience member is invited to connect and relate together the individual, otherwise unrelated, digital sex acts of each individual cell phone to one another. In the same way that visual pornography recircuits our sense of sexual satisfaction through the gaze, the *rhizopticon* stimulates our anxiety, while at the same time offers, through spam, methods of solving these anxieties. Its transfer of our bodily *drive* for sex onto our anxious relationship with our body's performativity allows the *rhizopticon* to stimulate anxiety and lust at the same time. Emotions, like anxiety, become disturbed, pharmakonic aphrodisiacs, as anxiety, which may otherwise dampen our sexual drive is sexualized, rewired as it is to the promise of sexual satisfaction open to us when we address our performative anxieties. Our new drive, our new bodily recircuit, becomes to satisfy our lusts by calming and appeasing our anxiety, and, in effect, becomes a form of sexual intercourse with the rhizopticonical gaze observing us. It is only when the audience member

takes a step backwards, from a micro to a macro view, 'zooming out', from the individual cell phone to the rhizomatic assemblage, that they can see that the given performative anxieties induced by spam are not an anxiety merely suffered by them, but that such anxieties are part of the *rhizopticon*'s digital anxiety-economy.

3. A New Habit Emerges

3.1 Counter-Algorithms

The title of my final installation is *Joy-Jitsu*[32]. The name arose out of a typo from a happy mistake when auto-correct software corrected the word *jiu* in Jiu-Jitsu to *joy*. The installation adapts my performance from *Self-[S]ensor* and projects a grid onto a wall consisting of a series of bodily gestures. Derived from the study, *Curious Rituals,* conducted by the California-based Near Future Laboratory, in which gestures arising from the interaction of human beings with technology, so-called gesture/bodily states like Cell Trance[33], Baboon's Face[34], and Sensor *Jiu Jitsu*[35] were catalogued. In keeping the altered name, I tried to emphasize the meaningfulness of these kinds of mistakes, or as William Kentridge calls them, "mistranslations,"[36] and sustain the sense of civil disobedience out of which these gestures had originally arose. A mistaken title, as with these humorous gestures, can be uncannily revealing of the irony and humour which are already employed in artistic practice as seen in Erwin Wurm's artwork and to a certain extend Tony Oursler's oeuvre, or

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[32] Jérôme Conquy, Photographe Plasticien, https://jeconquy.wixsite.com/monsite/joyjitsu (accessed December 15, 2020).

[33] Nicolas Nova, Kathrine Miyake, Walton Chiu, and Nancy Kwow 'People walking around when talking on their mobile phone is a common behavior. Referred to as "Cell Trance" in the Urban Dictionnary, this way of moving back and forth is often seen in public venues. To onlookers, the erratic perambulation looks aimless, as if the caller is detached from his surroundings, absorbed in a private sonic universe.' http://curiousrituals.nearfuturelaboratory.com/ (accessed December 15, 2020).

[34] Nicolas Nova, Kathrine Miyake, Walton Chiu, and Nancy Kwow 'Baboon's face is a gesture where the speaker covers both his mouth and the phone throughout the entire conversation. It keeps the conversation private, yet also shows consideration for both the speaker on the other end of the line and others in the vicinity of the speaker.' http://curiousrituals.nearfuturelaboratory.com/ (accessed December 15, 2020).

[35] Nicolas Nova, Kathrine Miyake, Walton Chiu, and Nancy Kwow, *Curious Rituals* (L.A.: The Near Future Laboratory, 2012), http://curiousrituals.nearfuturelaboratory.com/, 50 (accessed December 15, 2021).

[36] William Kentridge, *Six drawing lessons* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 150.

in our social acts generally. The word joy, for instance, is a complete, almost absurd, mischaracterization of the captured gestures, and yet nevertheless signifies the sarcastic and frenzied symphonic quality of the grid of images and their repetitiveness. In a useful way, these mistranslations help us to move away from strict, algorithmic thinking and integrate chance into artistic practice, widening the horizon of possibility and interpretation. Furthermore, when digital technologies, such as autocorrect, make mistakes too, might we not describe these mistakes as like a kind of techno-Freudian parapraxis, inadvertently revealing an ironic truth about their influence on us? In *Joy-Jitsu,* the goal is to take *imagined* gestures that embody a technophobic, albeit rebellious, non-normative attitude and, in performing them, create an installation that simulates new ways of acting, a new *habitus*, in and through our interaction with technology and their digital spaces. In the installation, an arcade soundscape plays to simulate an absurd environment.

3.2 Chronophotography

Similar to *Self-[S]ensor*, the installation *Joy-Jitsu* exists in an imagined digital space. Using stop-motion, or *chronophotography*, I set about photographing and subsequently making a video montage of my body in these different imagined and contorted postures, which I loop and project in 9 gesture-sequences, consisting of 45 figures of my body in-*habiting* these 9 different gestures. The *chronophotographic* technique, originally developed to study the bodily locomotion of humans and animals, became a tool in the 20-century for improving and optimizing work methods. The *chronocyclegraph*[37] captures any parasitic movements that interferes with the proper functioning of the production line, creating luminous tracings of sustained or repeated gestures performed throughout the work process. The resulting *chronocyclegraphs* eliminates any presence of the worker's body, which fades in view of the luminous tracings. Byung-Chul Han writes that "[a]s industrialization

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[37] Chronocyclegraph, developed by Frank Gilbreth and his wife, Lillian, is a device used to record a complete work cycle by taking still pictures with long exposures, the motion paths being traced by small electric lamps fastened to the worker's hands or fingers.

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proceeded, it became necessary to discipline the body and fit it to machinic production,"[38] and

the luminous tracings of the *chronocyclegraph* em*body* the movement of the worker's body

into a disembodied *process.* In *Joy-Jitsu,* my body remains, but it remains as a luminous

imprint, or tracings, of repetitive process, *pharmakonically* indeterminate.

3.3 Psychopolitics

The interface of *Joy-Jitsu* recircuits the repetitiveness and mechanicity of imagined

gestures we may in-habit in our interaction with technology through gestures which are

themselves acts of disobedience against technology. Specifically, in *Joy-Jitsu,* I avoid an

imaginary sensor. These sensors are usually found in shopping malls, but, as though

simulating a worker-in-protest, the figure interrupts any electronic form of capture and

reconfigures the luminous trace, or digital imprint, which the body leaves. As in Samuel

Beckett's work, where his characters are often absurd bodies, seen rolling and stumbling

through the world in blank and unexpressed acts of resistance, the human body becomes a

vehicle of the absurd, both predictable and unpredictable, certain and uncertain, disrupting the

processes that seek to capture and control it.

The sensor, as with most forms of networked digital technology, works like what Han

refers to as a *digital panopticon.* Data is what makes up our trace, and each person in their

interaction with the digital space leaves a unique map of the places they've been, the things

they've seen, the people they've spoken to, in the form of a digital trace. The body's process

of 'continuous variation,' its *potentia agendi,* encounters the digital space as simultaneously

transparent and closed-off. Its ground rules are concealed, structured in digital and

algorithmic computation that leave only the surface-level interface for digital users to interact

with, while its transparency, in the words of Han, comes to "haunt all spheres of life… The

society of Transparency is not a society of trust, but a society of control."[39]

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[38] Byung-Chul Han, Psycho-Politics: Neo Liberalism and New Technologies of Power (New York: Verso, 2017), 19.

[39] Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015),vii.

The contrarian attitude of *Joy-Jitsu* is a counter-emotional attitude, as it qualifies joy in an absurd and sarcastic way. Our body's *potentia agendi* relies on its emotional interface, which preserves the autonomy and *affectus* of the body's variability. This arises in view of the body's incapacity to engage directly with the decision-making agent behind digital spaces, rather like the body-labourer who lacks the right to negotiate with the structure and *character* of their labour. This mixture of automaticity and emotions makes us subject to *psychopolitical* steering. Trying to draw out the efficiency of the physical body is replaced with trying to draw out the efficiency of human emotions. Han's *violence of positivity* expresses the way in which, in rerouting our emotions towards a program of "over-achievement, over-production, over-communication, hyper-attention, and hyperactivity,"[40] controlling the productivity of the human being, both mind and body, involves controlling the *potentia affecti,* the emotional potential, and circuiting these emotions in whatever way maximizes their productive interaction, or their labour in, the digital space. *Joy-Jitsu* is an interruption of our *digital* labour, but also, in its sarcastic, absurdist form, it counters the joyful, or exhaustingly positive, attitude we are expected to maintain in the digital space.

3.4 Negentropy

The installation's goal is to simulate the effect of *negentropy,* extending the principles, which defined the *photomorphic* composites to capture visually the human body in a counter-active state. In discussing Erwin Schrödinger's book, *What is Life?,* Bernard Stiegler says that "[l]ife is negentropic, and this means that it is not possible to calculate the future."[41] Our being, as a body, is fundamentally a phenomenon of life, and thus subject to the laws of Nature. "It is not[...]possible to formalize a theory of a living being[...]you cannot calculate what is negentropic[...]what is negentropic is a singularity, it is a bifurcation that is

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[40] Byung-Chul Han, Lorraine Daston, *Topology of Violence*, trans. Amanda DeMarco (Cambridge: The MIT Press), viii.
[41] Anais Nony, "Bernard Stiegler on Automatic Society," in The Third Rail, October 18, 2017. http://thirdrailquarterly.org/bernard-stiegler-on-automatic-society/ (accessed March 7, 2021).

impossible to anticipate with computation, with probabilities, etc."[42] In *Joy-Jitsu*, the installation, as it recycles gestures of resistance through a repetitive, digital inter-space, provides a living form of acting within the constraints, and recircuiting the influence of, a given system. The computable, deterministic rules of the system, in other words, its entropy (or tendency towards entropy), is recircuited only *from within* the system itself, in acts, which reroute its entropy, introducing chance, uncertainty, and improbability. In Joy-Jitsu, as the body acts in its absurdist, performative way, avoiding the camera and the invisible sensor, it leaves a digital imprint. This digital imprint, as it negotiates with the censor-sensor double of the camera, which both captures and, in being avoided, creates a new digital habitus for the body (in its acts of resistance) to inhabit, inputs the unpredictability of the gestures into the tracking and sensorous agent (of the camera). This imprint, therefore, while giving an image of the body in-movement, taking as it does the form of an absurdist performance, imprints the body in-resistance into the digital space. Negentropy[43] is stimulated in acts of rewiring and recircuiting, which preserve the energy-capacity of the system, while redirecting it towards forms of existence, or being, less prone to decay. *Joy-Jitsu* is an attempt to capture this act of negentropic recircuit from within the confines of an imagined digital space.

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[42] Ibid.

[43] A curious paradox, worthy of further study and comment, exists in view of Schrödinger's use of the term negative entropy, which was a concept meant to explain the paradoxical fact that, although life involved more ordered systems (and ordered systems induce more entropy), life seemed to counteract this. Part of this is owed to the fact that life is an open system, so that many more possibilities are open to it, eschewing the easy effects of entropy, which may otherwise affect closed systems. In Stiegler, this paradox is wielded to full effect, where, contrary to critics of his position, he argues fully for the use of negative entropy in designing and organizing systems, where open-endedness becomes a structural feature of organized systems, crucial for their avoidance of decay and their openness to possibility, i.e. life.

Conclusion

The move from body to being, from our acts as a mechanical entity to our existence as a phenomenon of life, which interacts and changes its environment, involves nothing more than a *recircuit*. The body is not transcended in the move to being, as it counter-communicates (reacts) with a system and recircuits the systems' own *potentia agendi,* it becomes something like a being, like a stable, existential entity that is more than its mere openness to continuous variation. In the same way that the open, transparent digital space enters our lives, offering us a kind of freedom, which, as we interact with it, surveils us, alters our body, and rewires our emotions, the being of social disturbance, or civil disobedience, emerges as the body counteracts the effects placed upon it and recircuits the system's negative, entropic effect towards something positive and negentropic. These are, fundamentally, *pharmakonic gestures,* movements between poison and remedy, negativity and positivity, which my installations try to simulate and create in their investigation of technology's effect on the human body. In his 16th-century *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*[44], a 'manual' for not being fooled by power, and an influence on practitioners of civil disobedience like Thoreau or Ghandi, Etienne de la Boétie argues that it is not by fighting against tyranny that we manage to defeat it; instead, by understanding its mechanisms we will neither suffer nor desire it.

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[44] "Discours de la servitude volontaire," Etienne de La Boétie, https://france3regions.francetvinfo.fr/sites/regions_france3/files/assets/documents/2019/01/17/servitude-4043889.pdf (accessed December 15, 2020).

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Practice Documentation

Pharmakon: *Acts, Traces, and Maps exhibition*

AMPS

Photography, transfers, 1/4'' nails, magnets, 2020

Amps, Installation view*,* Satellite Gallery, London Ontario, 2020

Amps an anagram of the word "Spam is a series of photographic transfers that emanate from extracting still images from several videos which follows in the furrow of my overall theme; how our modern technology prescribes our psychological and physical behaviours. Not only did I want to explore the plastic notions of accumulation, multi-layering, and disruption, but also, identities, and more specifically, shifting identities. Indeed, my investigation started off by projecting screenshots of visual spam that I had received in my old mailbox, onto my face. Then, the resulting video combinations of my face and spam were projected onto seven other individual's faces.

Curious of the result of these moving hypnotic gazes or "contaminated" faces in thrall to the transience of these spam screen-shot images, I wanted to further the investigation, so I interrupted the flow of these images by freeze-framing selected images; a sort of "surgical incision" to magnify and extract photographic images: *Punctum(s)* along the time line.

 The series of photographs that emerged from this extraction reminded me, to some extent, of the collage/montage of Dadaist artist Hannah Höch, who worked around themes such as androgyny, shifting gender roles, and explored the new images of Identity; but more so, of the French artist Orlan, who is well known for changing her physical appearance through plastic surgery. She uses her face and body as malleable tools for shifting identities.

These random made collages imbue an otherwise ordinary face with hints of the bizarre, the absurd, and the uncanny, mutating and liquefying the original visage into a strange, distorted, and to a certain extent, anamorphic digital face, creating a digital mask.

Masks also have a rich history dating from the Egyptian death masks, having its own identity, to the Greeks and the Romans, where the mask was also a way to keep a trace of identity. The Romans called the theatre mask *persona*, etymology of "personality", and comes from *personare*: "To resonate through". The mask is first and foremost a projection. The psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung used the word *persona* to designate the social mask and to distinguish it from individuality, from the Self. Do these advertisements (spam) warp our perception of our true self? Do they deter us of who we are? In this particular work, there is a sense of moving in and out of an identity. Do these masks reflect shifting identities? How do these spam affect people? What are the consequences of this onslaught of junk mail on our psyche?
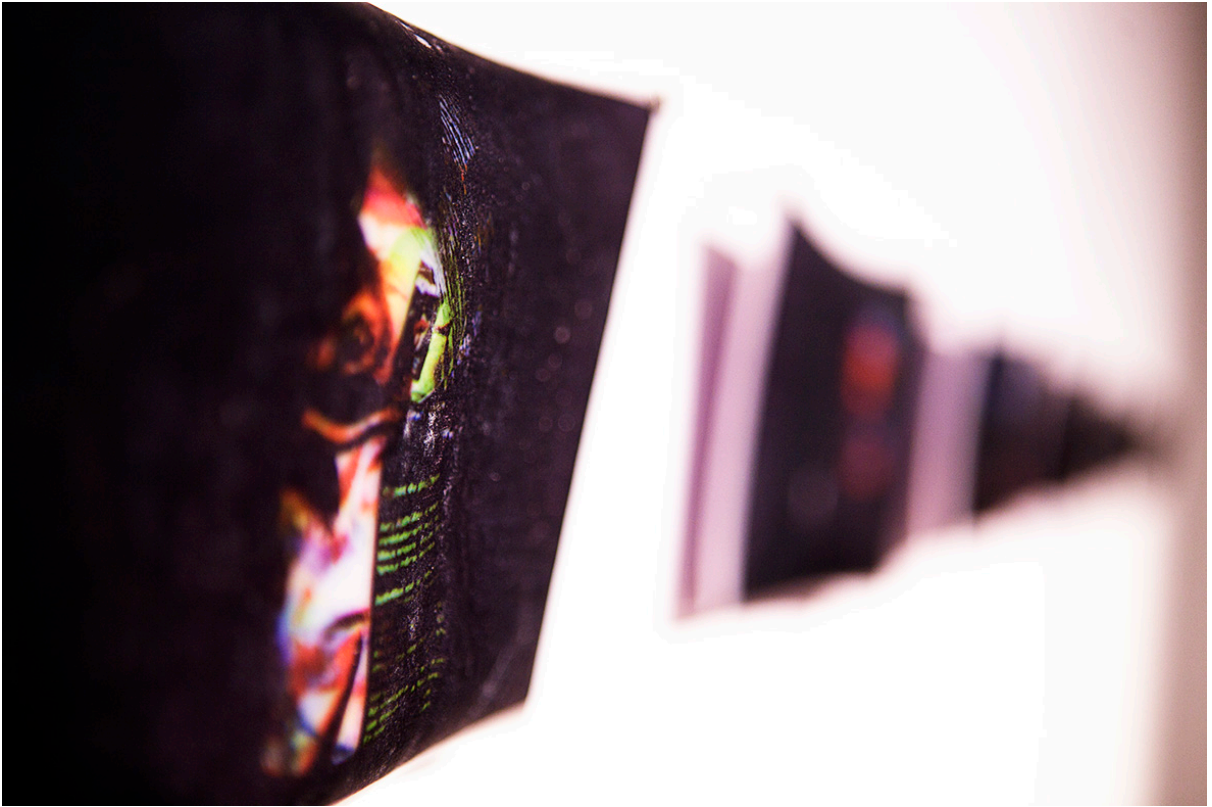
Amps, Installation view*,* Satellite Gallery, London Ontario, 2020
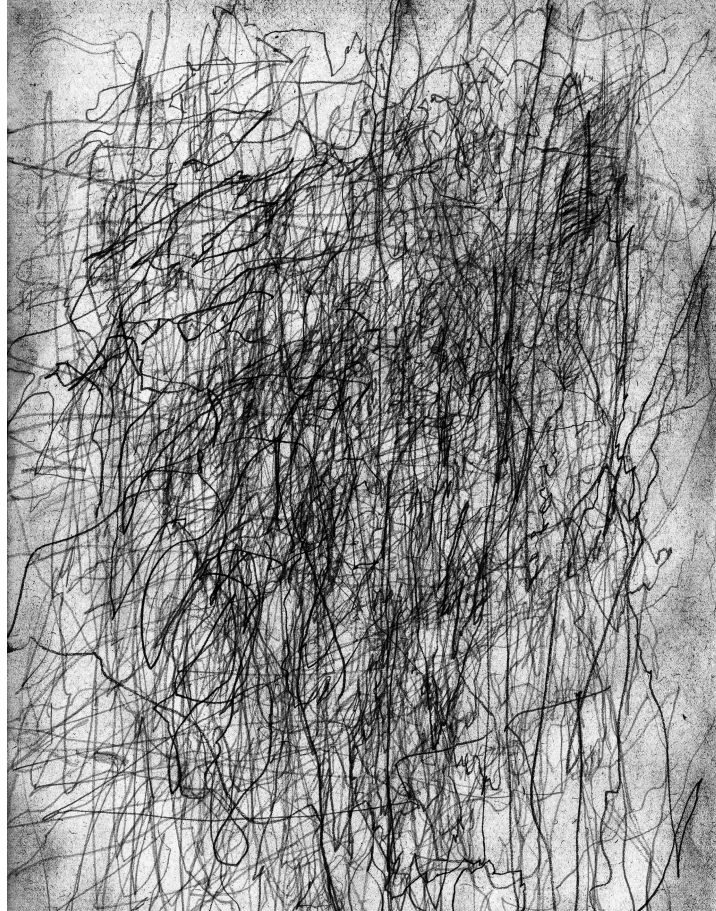

Amps, 2020

Amps, 2020

Amps, 2020

Maps & Mazes

2 drawings, pencil, print, 2018- 2020

Maps & Mazes, drawing, 2020

Maps & Mazes is a series of drawings that take place on different transit buses. The leitmotif, of this series, is the gesture of my hand on a sheet of paper, a defined space, within another space, the bus. Its rhythmic cadence during the journey pushes my body to follow its motion. What happens when we put pencil to paper during this trajectory? My hand accepts, without any resistance, the motion created by the bus. My hand and body act as a pendulum of a seismograph.

The resulting outcome is a series of drawings, constituted by lines that seem to mesh and create a map and/or a maze.

A strange paradox where it is the machine, and more specifically its motion, that creates the drawing by constraining my body to follow its movement and, hence, triggering a mechanical drawing as if I was an automated machine, and not me, the human.
Each line is created by one trajectory from, either, my house to the university, or, from the university back to my house. My body takes on the role of a sensitive medium, transcribing the way the bus driver drives. Whether the driving is aggressive and rushing, or smooth and calm, the lines drawn are different: some are smoother than others. The gestures become, in a way, involuntary and unconscious.
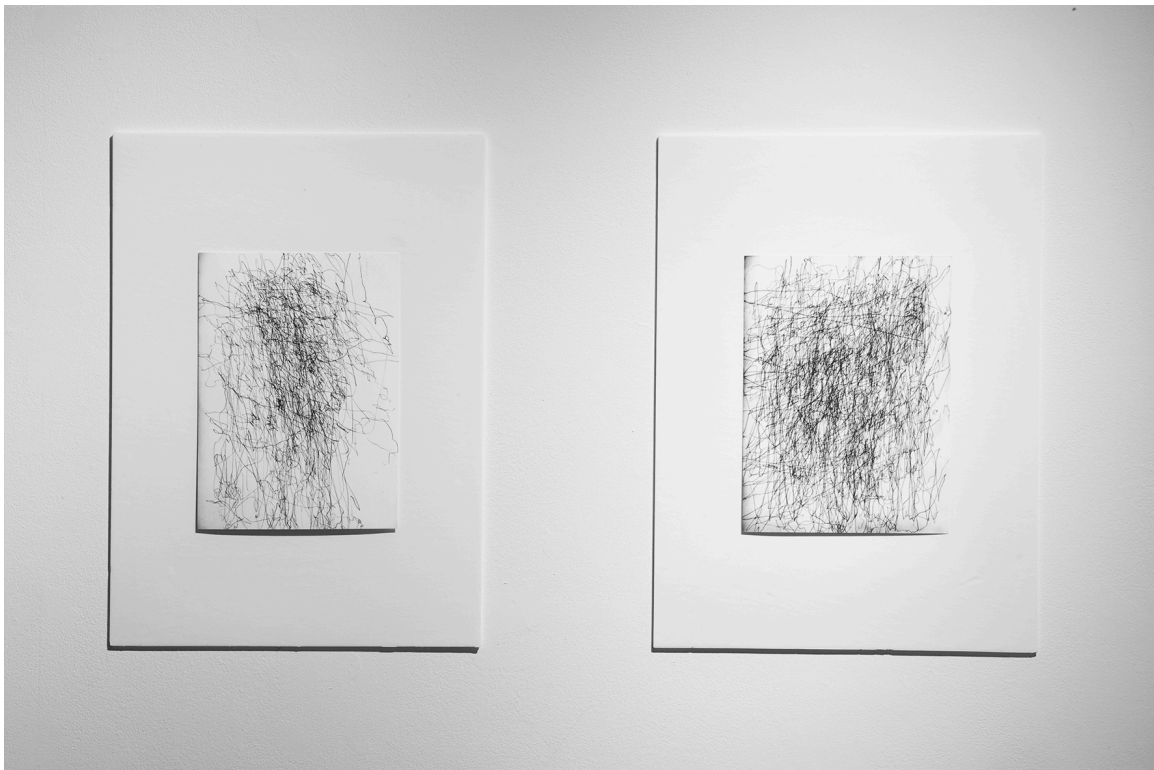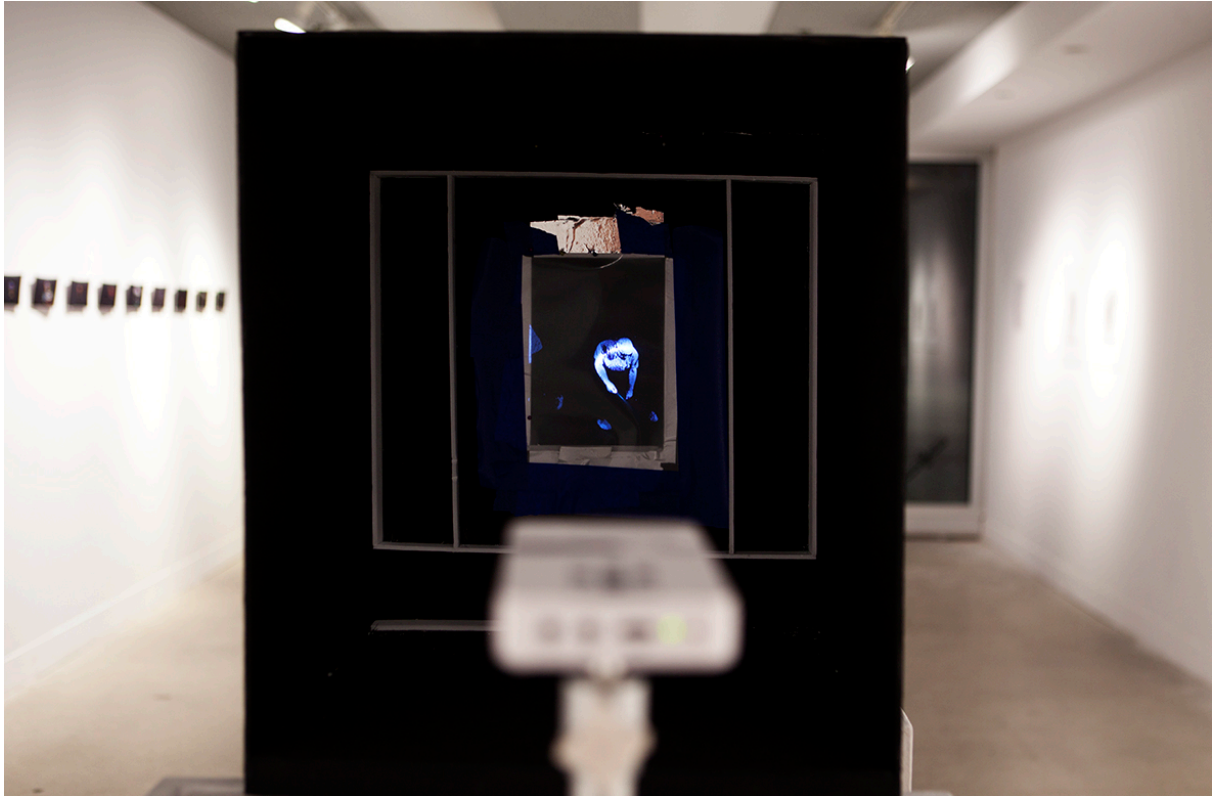

Maps & Mazes, Still photograph from the show *Pharmakon*: *Acts, Traces, and Maps*

Self-[S]ensored, a neurotic dance

Installation, projection, black box, h: 51 cm, l: 75 cm W: 43 cm, video, sound, 1'57'',
2019. Sound creation by Forest Muran.

Self-[S]ensored, Installation view, 2020

Self-[S]ensored, 2020

   Self-[S]ensored, a Neurotic Dance is an installation comprised of a black box, made out of
foam core, and a cut out window that allows viewers to see inside. This structure, which sits

on top of towering plinths, looks crude and fragile. To its side, also on top of stacked plinths, is a loud speaker that sits inside a metallic tube. The soundscape that emerges from this structure tears open the surrounding silence with its waves of rhythmic and metallic beats, producing echoes, as if emanating from a tunnel.

Inside the box, images of two bodies move in a peculiar fashion, as would a contortionist do. These jerky figures are none but myself, performing. First shot in stop motion, the sequences of images obtained were, then, projected through a silk screen and captured in video. Later, the final video montage was projected onto a piece of Mylar, acting as a screen inside the box. In between the cut-out window and the screen is a set of four mirrors, that are disposed in such a way, that they look like a pyramid on its side with the screen as its pyramidion. The mirrors reflect, by duplication, the images that are projected. A kaleidoscope of moving images appears in front of the viewer's eyes.

The black box is a metaphor for those, behind the scene, invisible mechanisms used in social medias. Also, our new technologies such as computers, cameras, and smartphones are black boxes *par excellence*. These technologies affect our behaviours so much, that we don't even notice them anymore. They have become so prominent that they have become "invisible" in our environment. In this work, I use my body as study material, hence questioning the effects of new technologies on our bodies and psyches. The gesture, that I partake in, was inspired by a study from the California based research group called Near Future Laboratory (N. F. L.)[45]. The group documented new body gestures that are triggered by our new digital technology such as sensors. They noticed that sensor irritated shoppers, when entering a store, figured out ways to avoid the sensors by either leaning on their side, or squatting. They called this, *Jiu Jitsu*. I tried, several times to replicate these gestures. The resulting videos are projected, in a two-minutes loop, side by side, inside the box.

The *ensemble* gives off an uncanny feeling and has multiple levels of reading. This installation covers themes such as alienation by technology, master-slave dialectic, scopophilia, control, narcissism, surveillance, identity construction, fake-self, privacy, individuality, self-denial vs. self affirmation, normalization, censorship, self-policing, self-control. This research was fueled by writers and philosophers such as Freud, McLuhan, and Foucault, just to name a few.

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[45] Nicolas Nova, Kathrine Miyake, Walton Chiu, Nancy Kwow, The Near Future Laboratory, http://nearfuturelaboratory.com/ (accessed December 15, 2020).
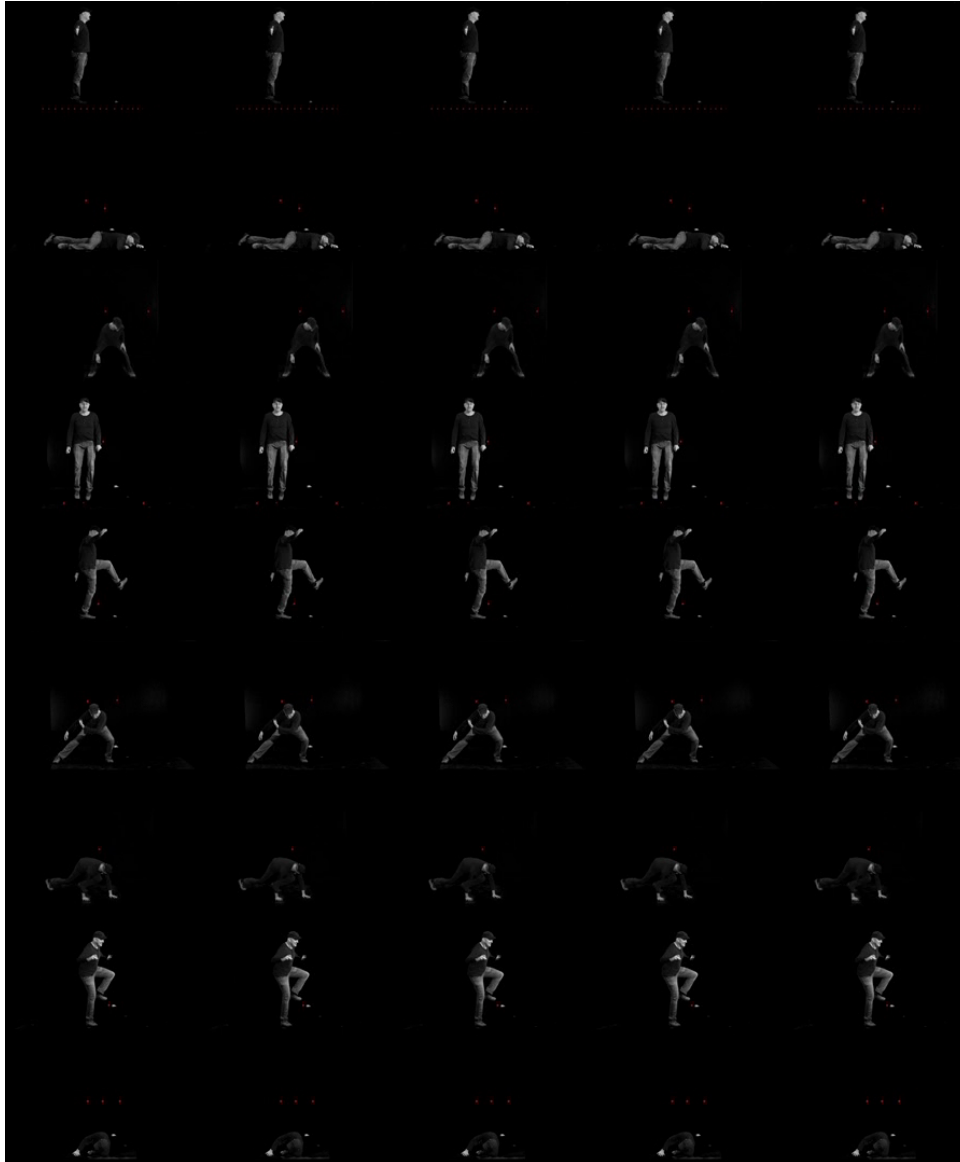
Self-[S]ensored, Installation view, 2020

Joy Jitsu

Installation, video, sound, tarp (4 meters), 2'00, 2019-2020
Sound creation by Forest Muran.

Joy Jitsu, installation view, 2020

I am interested in how modern technologies play a role as prescriber of behaviours, that is, how they modify our corporal and psychological behaviours, and thus, our social codes.

In this work, I wanted to question the effects that motion sensors have on our bodies. Already in the 1980's when I lived in Caracas, sensors, in the form of mechanical parrots, welcomed shoppers by emitting a sound. What was funny at the beginning, quickly became a nuisance.

Since then, technology has evolved dramatically. Sensors have become practically invisible. Sensors detect changes in the environment through electronic components, and serve different purposes, such as surveillance, environmental monitoring, and home automation. Nowadays, many shops have motion sensors that announce the entrance of shoppers.

I set about photographing myself in these different, imagined, and contortioned postures. I used a photographic technique called stop motion, a sibling of nineteenth century Etienne-Jules Marey's Chronophotography. My gestures were recorded in a sequence of images and then put into a video montage software. The resulting grid-like patterned film was projected onto a wall with sound creating an uncanny, absurd, and humorous piece of artwork.

To paraphrase Marshal McLuhan, humour is a system of communication that helps probe our invisible environments[46].

Joy Jitsu, installation view, 2020

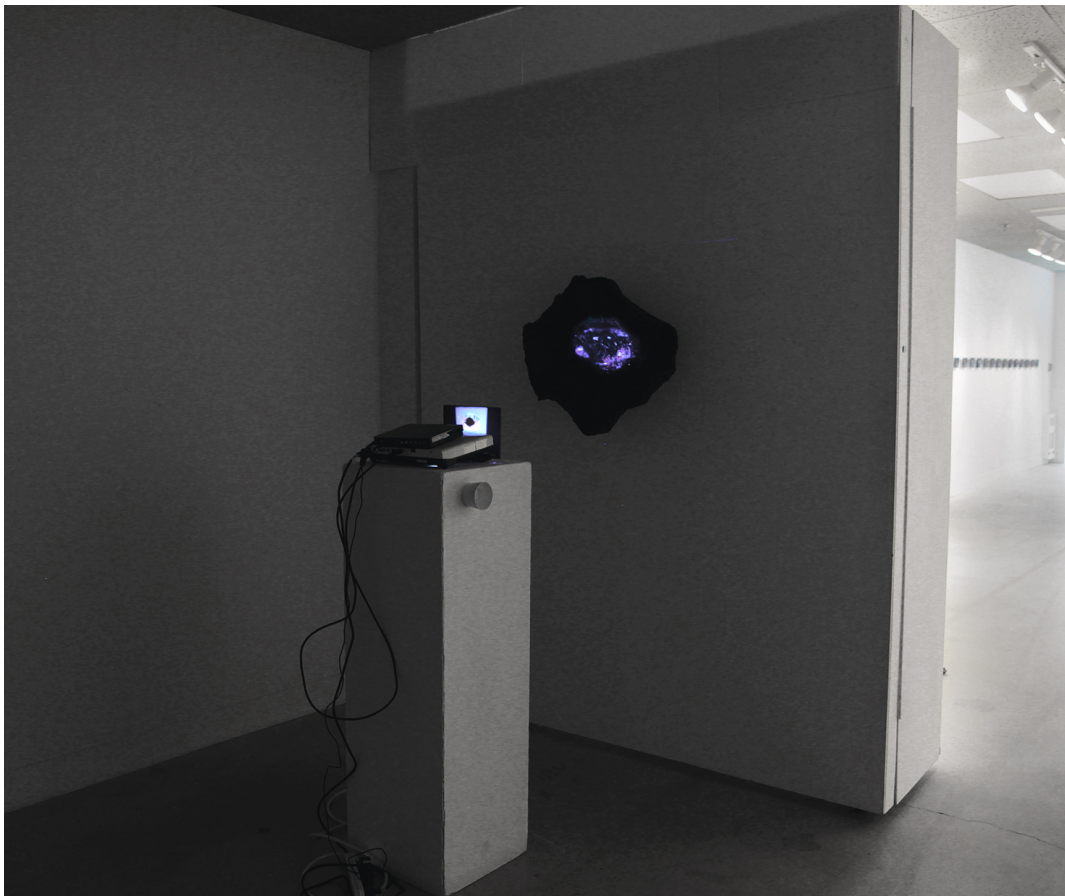[46] Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage-An inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam, 1967), 92.

MAPS

Installation, Projection, Video, Sound, Plastered concave structure, H: 50cm L: 60cm D: 23cm, 2'00, 2020

Maps, installation view, 2020

Maps is an installation composed of a video projected inside a black concave prop, with its surface sprinkled with glitter.

My research began with screen shots of visual spam that has been saturating my mailbox for a while. From these captures, I created a slide show, which I projected, first of all, on my face and eye, and then, on other people's faces. Two distinct videos emerged from this process. One is a close-up video of my eye with spam images flickering on it. From this video, I created a new montage, adding reversed and slowed down sound tracks (which gave rise to the title of the installation), other spam images, and a video of a mouth that opens that pops up occasionally.

The resulting montage was, subsequently, projected onto hand-made foam core cubes and rectangles of different sizes. The final film is projected onto a black prop that looks a bit like a geode, or a crater of some sort.
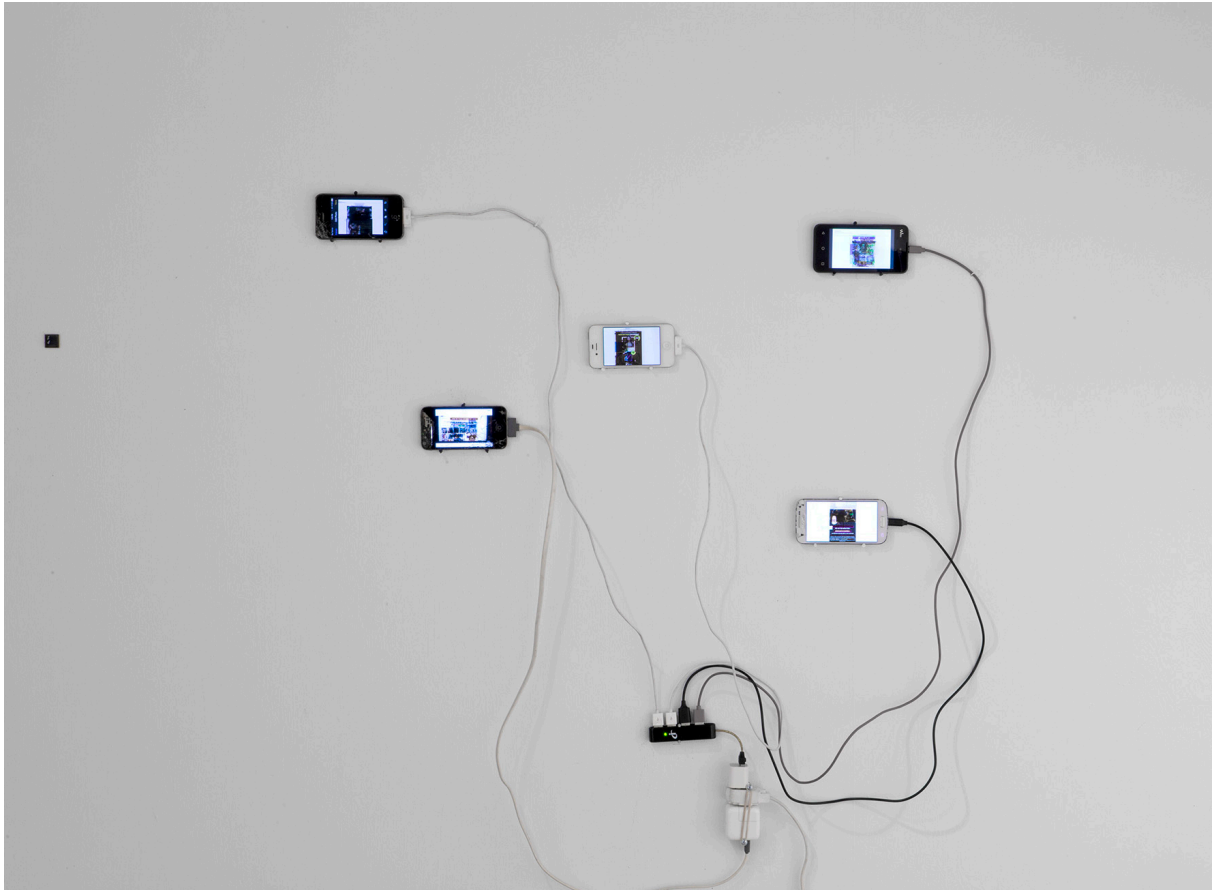

Maps, installation view, 2020

PAMS

Photography combination, Smartphones, 2020

Pams, Installation view, 2020

Pams is another anagram for Spam. *Pams* is a series of multilayered screen shot images of junk mail that I received in my email-saturated box. This multi-layering reflects the amount of spam receive, their accumulation in my mailbox. They also reflect certain worries of our current society such as erection disorders, the sizes of men's sexual organ, the desire of sexual fulfillment of women. By playing on desire, these unwanted e-mails always try to sell something. These composites have been uploaded to cell phones. People are obsessed with cell phones. Cells are our tech-extended personality that connects us to the outside world that continually interferes with our life, our personal space, and transitional invading devices exposing us to the world. "The cell is like a contaminating hole opening into our life", says

Tony Oursler[47]. They have seemed to take over all aspects of life. They have become life placebos, and "fetish machines." According to Oursler, the phone is everything and he considers it to be a new sexual organ through retinal sex. Is it a surrogate for sex?

Pams, Image still, 2020

[47] Tony Oursler and David Rimanelli, *High* (London: Publisher Lisson Gallery, 2008), 16.

Writing Practice Component: Case Study

Tony Oursler

It was, on the 5th of May 2005, at the Jeu de Paume in Paris that I had my first encounter with Tony Oursler's artwork. I was invited by a friend to go and see his exhibition called « Dispositifs »[48]. At the time, I did not know who he was and what he did. I wasn't that keen on contemporary art, as I did not understand its aesthetics, hence my hesitation to go and see the show. I was at the height of my photography career, working for prestigious newspapers and magazines such as Le Monde and Elle, and my mind was very much entrenched in the rigid codes of photojournalism. The art world was far removed from mine. Nevertheless, my friend insisted that I come. So, I tagged along, blindly, not knowing what I was getting into. When I entered the exhibition, my reaction was visceral. The screaming sounds, and his devices immediately aggressed my eardrums and retinas. His work got under my skin, pushing me to press on, with quickened pace, catching out of the corner of my eye glimpses of the artworks, leaving behind me the sonic inflections. I finally reached the museum's Café, where I ordered an espresso. Boggled and baffled by what I had just perceived, I pondered, while stirring my coffee, on my thoughts and the different emotional states that his work had just provoked in me, as if my visceral reactions were weapons of resistance. Needless to say, Oursler's aesthetic and formal world and invented language was so far removed from my personal photojournalism and social documentary background that it was hard for me to appreciate or even comprehend it. This was an unsettling experience. It seemed that his world had no plastic boundaries, his architectural works, video projections, and installations, were a vast nebula to my mind. So mysterious and strange was his work that it irritated and exasperated me. There was something about it that stuck in my mind. At the time, I couldn't

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[48] Devices in English.

quite put my finger on it. Something had seeped through my skin and was gradually propagating through my body and mind. Had Oursler's work infected me? Emotions and ideas are highly contagious. Tolstoy, accordingly to Jonathan Gottschal in *The Story Telling Animal*, said that "the artist's job is to 'infect' his audience with his own ideas and emotions: the stronger the infection, the better is the art as art."[49]

My second encounter was ten years later (2015) in Arles, where Oursler had been invited by the Luma foundation to *Les Rencontres de la Photographie*. I was, then, finishing my first year at the University of Paris 8 in their MA/MFA program, in the domain of contemporary photography. My ambition was, during those two years, to work, formally and aesthetically, on something as far removed as possible from the world of photojournalism[50]. Thus, I oriented my research towards the invisible forces that lay behind all things, and tried to answer the question of what lies beyond appearances. Consequently, I titled my theoretical thesis, *La Photographie, Corps de l'Invisible (De l'Indice à l'Îcone)*, and my practical thesis, as *Trans Parens*[51], Latin for "Beyond Appearances." My professors who knew I was working around Spirit photography and the invisible forces, strongly urged me to go and see Oursler's work. Yet again, once I got there, my reaction to his main video projection[52] left me dumbstruck. In contrast, the smaller installations in the cafeteria, next to the popcorn and the soda machine, had more of a relaxed, less serious, library atmosphere to them, and these small installations intrigued me. The installations as well as the main video projection were both inspired from the materials in his book, *The Imponderables*[53]. The book was so intriguing that

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[49] Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make us Human* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 149.

[50] It was a difficult place to be. The world recession coupled with the arrival of new technologies (Smart Phones, Internet) had taken their toll on, what was soon to be, my old profession. Nonetheless, I used this crisis, as an excuse, to change my stand.

[51] Jérôme Conquy, Photographe Plasticien, https://jeconquy.wixsite.com/monsite/transparens (accessed October 2, 2020).

[52] Tony Oursler was commissioned to create a 4D film for his show *Imponderable* in Arles. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBJxQB5_zkc (accessed October 2, 2020).

[53] Tony Oursler, "Imponderable – The Archives of Tony Oursler," les presses du réel, https://www.lespressesdureel.com/ouvrage.php?id=3921 (accessed October 2, 2020).

I bought it. By flipping through its pages, and consulting the archives[54] set up in the Atelier des Forges' cafeteria, not only was I able to gather material for my thesis, but I also understood that his work (in general) was not just about the occult, the paranormal, or even Spirit photography, but revolved around narratives, story telling, and, as watermarks, debunking past and present belief systems.

I believe that my second encounter with Oursler's work triggered in me the desire, not only to learn more about the artist, but also to explore the different media that he engages with. Playfully and with a "collage mentality"[55], the artist experiments with different media ranging from painting, sculptures, video, sound, theatre, performances, and writings, often mixing them to create both small and large-scale installations or environments. Oursler's artwork is protean, multifaceted, and multidirectional. Tony Oursler's work has influenced me, and I find myself, now, in a relationship with his ideas (notions), methods (& media), and devices.

Tony Oursler is a master of the art of installation, an art form that is associated with Conceptual art. Since his debut at the California Institute of the Arts in the 70s, under the patronage of such conceptual artists as Michael Ascher, John Baldassari, and Kaare Rafoss, Oursler seemed to be pre-destined for that art form.

The Tate museum defines "installation art, or 'environments', as large-scale, mixed-media constructions, often designed for a specific place and for a temporary period of time, where the spectator has to walk through in order to engage fully with the work of art."[56] Oursler's installations use different types of spaces. These spaces can influence the installations' complexities. They vary in size, and range from small to monumental. When they are

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[54] His archives were collected over a period of fifteen years and include primary edition books, 3000 images and objects. The book is comprised of 1200 images and 10 scholarly texts.
[55] Omar-Pascual Castillo, "Thinking Gaze or How to Develop a Rhizomatic Way of Thinking," in *Tony Oursler: Mirada Pensante = Thinking Gaze* (Madrid: Turner, Spain), 36.
[56] "Installation Art," Tate Museum, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/i/installation-art (accessed October 2, 2020).

conceived indoors, the installations are often composed of multiple pieces, as opposed to those that are produced for an outside setting. To create these pieces, Oursler uses a vast range of different materials natural and man-made alike (daily objects, fabrics, etc.), mediums (video, painting, writing, sound, etc.), and environments (inside and outside).

He favours the artisan's approach by handcrafting all of his accessories using the resources available. Often strolling through thrift stores, Oursler brings into his installations daily, banal, familiar objects such as salvaged furniture, clothes, fabrics, and rag dolls. He has a reprocessed method. In addition, he uses materials that range from clay, wood, fiberglass, metal, and glass, where all these elements coagulate to create assembled 3D installations. Oursler states: "Over the years, I had generated a large number of characters, backdrops and props for my video worlds. I had tricked myself into making things by hand, a process, which I love, in the service of a larger conceptual framework."[57]

Oursler discovered Sony's Portapak at the end of the 70s. Since then, he has been "blend[ing] video-graphic image and its light with paintings, sound (music, speech or noise), [writings], and numerous objects found or created, generating sets that are crudely put together, and over-simplified, in accordance with what in retrospect could be called the 'Do-it yourself' punk principle."[58] These makeshift fabrications are often perceived as uneasy structures, whether they are monumental, or reduced to small-scale objects and installations.

Oursler began as a painter, and his installation artworks look like paintings that were fabricated either from various cultural artefacts, or childhood memories. They often emanate from the artist's imagination starting from scratch. Some of Oursler's sculptural work "resemble traditional craft-based sculptures, but do not fall under the same category.

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[57] Gianni Mercurio, "Sketches at Twilight 1996" in *Tony Oursler: Open Obscura*, edited by Demetrio Paparoni and Gianni Mercurio (Milano: Ore Cultura, 2011), 123.

[58] Denis Gielen, untitled essay in *Vox Vernacular: An Anthology* (Hornu: Mercatorfonds, 2013), 10.

Installation art "effectively inverts the principles of sculpture where the piece is designed to be viewed from the outside, experienced as a self-contained arrangement of elements."[59]

Oursler has become the "legitimate maker of speaking objects, [or] thinking objects."[60] For other critics, his manipulated and transformed objects have become "thinking sculptures."[61] To render this effect, Oursler projects videos on any number of surfaces, consequently breathing life into the "sculptural, mute, dead, inert, paralysed object," [62] or, in other words, inanimate objects, "provok[ing] a dynamic energy, displacing the solemnity of the sculptural object through sequence, light, sound, colour, and voice. It is as if he is 'infesting' his sculptural objects with the 'sensorimotor sensations of the cinema'. This has the quality to liberate his characters in his work from the claustrophobic structural cage, of the object."[63] His characters "transmute through the gift of fractured-narrative, [and] trans-substantiati[ate] video into 'entities', who think, breath, laugh, react, and act before the spectator's gaze."[64] Thus, he uses his installation art as a sensory engaging art and experience, combining low and high technology entertainment industry resources and "technological seduction, surprise and the psychological stimulation of desire, [to create] a scopic drive,"[65] and an immediate emotional impact. Moreover, walking into an Ourslerian installation is like entering a sensorial womb, or a "matrix of sensations."[66] Spectators and participants are, in an instant, enveloped, immersed, and sometimes submerged by the surroundings, hence turning inside out and twisting the situation; the viewers become the center of attraction of the piece and

[59] Bob Lansroth, "What Is Installation Art and How Does It Transform Our Perception?" Widewalls, https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/installation-art (accessed October 2, 2020).
[60] Omar-Pascual Castillo, "Thinking Gaze or How to Develop a Rhizomatic Way of Thinking," *Tony Oursler: Mirada Pensante = Thinking Gaze* (Madrid: Turner, Spain), 34.
[61] Ibid., 38.
[62] Ibid., 33-34.
[63] Ibid., 33-34.
[64] Ibid., 33-34.
[65] F. Javier Panera, "Charlatans, Puppets, and Expanded Video," in *Tony Oursler: Mirada Pensante = Thinking Gaze* (Madrid: Turner, 2008), 114.
[66] Donald Kuspit, "The Matrix of Sensations," Artnet, http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/kuspit8-5- 05.asp (accessed October 2, 2020).

"almost the main subject," as writer Bob Lansroth concurs[67]. The work of art is "a body to penetrate and feel from the inside."[68]

The spectators' interactions with Oursler's art works, which are sometimes placed in liminal spaces such as beneath the stairs, along a winding path, creating a "labyrinth of the uncanny,"[69] where, visually and physically solicited, they become involuntarily active participants in an overall immersive display of videographics and sound. A fine example of this, is his installation *Lock 2, 4, 6*[70] where the artist converted the entire Kunsthaus-Bregenz building, in Austria, "into a meta-installation, using synchronized projections, super graphics,[71] and shaped flat panels to form a maze through which participants navigate."[72] In our interface-obsessed society, this installation refers to the way mechanical or electronic reproductive systems, such as photography, film, television, and the internet, "have come to dictate not only the way we see the world, but also the ways that images are constructed."[73] The overall theme of this installation is inter-connectedness, the relationship and the ebb and flow between technology and humanity. Oursler notes, "how we are becoming more like machines and machines are becoming more like us."[74] "We shape our tools, and our tools shape us," a phrase written by Father John Culkin, according to Gerrit Verstraete. [75]

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[67] Bob Lansroth, "What Is Installation Art and How Does It Transform Our Perception?" Widewalls, https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/installation-art (accessed October 2, 2020).

[68] Demetrio Paparoni and Gianni Mercurio, *Tony Oursler*: *Open Obscura* (Milano: Ore Cultura, 2011), 13.

[69] Denis Gielen and Tony Oursler, *Vox Vernacular: An Anthology*, (Hornu: Mercatorfonds, 2013), 60.

[70] Tony Oursler,"Tony Oursler: LOCK 2,4,6," Lehmann Maupin, https://www.lehmannmaupin.com/museums-and-globalexhibitions/kub-kunsthaus-bregenz-austria/installation-views (accessed October 3, 2020).

[71] Super graphics are large-scale painted or applied decorative art in bold colors and typically in geometric or typographic designs, used over walls and sometimes floors and ceilings to create an illusion of expanded or altered space.

[72] Denis Gielen and Tony Oursler, *Vox Vernacular: An Anthology* (Hornu: Mercatorfonds, 2013), 60.

[73] Petra Heck, "Interview with Tony Oursler," in *I/0 Underflow*, edited by Jacqueline Grandjean (Amsterdam: Oude Kerk, 2015), 10.

[74] Demetrio Paparoni, "Tony Oursler and the Mythical Image" in *Tony Oursler: Open Obscura*, edited by Demetrio Paparoni and Gianni Mercurio (Milano: Ore Cultura, 2011), 14.

[75] Gerrit Verstraete, "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us." McLuhan Galaxy, April 01, 2013. https://mcluhangalaxy.wordpress.com/2013/04/01/we-shape-our-tools-and-thereafter-our-tools-shape-us/ (accessed March 7, 2021).

In his installations, Oursler also uses pre-cinematic devices as those used at the turn of the nineteenth century that were "formally associated with the world of illusion, magic, and phantasmagoria."[76] Interested in all types of technologies and their effect on humans, Oursler's research led him to draw an Optical Time line. He started with Athanasius Kircher's magic lantern (1646), all the way to modern technologies. *Influence Machine*[77] is the offspring of this research according to Denis Gielen, in *Vox Vernacular: An Anthology*, Oursler, through his research, found that the first drawings made with the Camera Obscura, represented an inverted image of a devil which is associated with the inversion of personality, a binary codification, a game of opposites: joyful or sad, good or bad. "This human aspect of image production technology is still present: the demonic has been and remains associated with technology."[78] Through out the history of Spiritism, technology has played an important role to make belief, to convince people of the veracity of ghosts and paranormal activities. Spirit photography used the newly invented camera, a device that people at the turn of the nineteenth century believed in, because photography was considered a daughter of the sciences. Photography was patented for the sole scientific and technical purpose of collecting, tracing, archiving, and recording all experimental data emanating from the sciences, which were booming at the time. It was considered a tool that was capable of reproducing reality, but also a reality that is invisible to the naked eye. Photographic images became proof. Sciences in that century were highly influenced by the empirical values of a positivist society. Since the birth of photography, an image capturing device, and subsequently, all technological devices stemming from it since then, have been associated with mimesis, hence, reality and truth. Spirit photography used the device as proof of the existence of super-natural forces. Any technological advances (telegraph, telephones, TV sets, answering machines, fax

[76] Francisco Javier, *Tony Oursler: Mirada Pensante = Thinking Gaze* (Madrid: Turner, Spain), 115.
[77] Tony Oursler,"The Influence Machine," Tonyoursler.com, Video, October 19, 2000, 7:52, https://tonyoursler.com/the-influence-machine-new-york (accessed October 2, 2020).
[78] Ibid.

machines, and cell phones), since the nineteenth century, is "coextensive with a psychic process sought by Spiritualists,"[79] that mislead people and are tools to extort money. David Rimanelly, in a conversation with Oursler in the book *High,* states that "the demons and ghosts of today are on the go, mobile." In this same conversation, Oursler explains that phones are a "tech-extended personality" and are "like a contaminating hole opening into [our] lives," a "transitional object", or a "non-differentiation, fetish machine,"[80] invading our personal, private, and intimate space, in other words, a space-invader. How can we, then, protect our personal space from this intrusion, asks Oursler. In response, Rimanelly asks the question whether cell-phones are "life-placebos." *Cherry Nokia*[81] featuring soft-core performances is a formal response to Oursler's questioning of smartphones. Phones according to Oursler, "collapse all space into your pocket," [82] your conversations, always, being monitored and recorded. They seem to have been designed as sex objects, or even oral sex, according to Raminelly conversing with Oursler retranscribed in the book *High*. The phones become everything, new sexual organs, either for oral sex or retinal sex. In other words, they become surrogate objects for sex.

By exploring and redefining narrative, performance and theatrical registers of video, Oursler "moves this media into an expanded dimension that obliges [the viewers] to rethink [their] definition of 'expositional experience', using as a starting point the physical and the psychological experiences of the spectator."[83] Also, these video installations "free the observer from the 'cervical paralysis' to which they are subjected in the cinema or other contemplative forms of moving image, inviting them to adopt a more active and critical

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[79] Kenneth White, "Until you get to know me: Tony Oursler's Aetiology of Television," Millennium Film Journal, No. 57, (Spring 2013), 76.
[80] Tony Oursler and David Rimanelli, *High* (London: Publisher Lisson Gallery, 2008), 16.
[81] Tony Oursler, "High," AO, http://artobserved.com/2008/09/go-see-high-by-tony-oursler-at-lisson-gallery-london-sept-3-oct-3/ (accessed October 3).
[82] Tony Oursler and David Rimanelli, *High* (London: Publisher Lisson Gallery, 2008), 10.
[83] Panera, Tony Oursler: Mirada Pensante = Thinking Gaze, 113.

role."[84] Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media*[85] talks about the Western tradition of pictorial illusion, in which a screen functions as a window into a virtual space, something for the viewer to look into but not act upon. In traditional projection, the spectator freezes in front of the image as if their attention was totally absorbed by it, hypnotized by the light. Light is a hypnotic medium that creates a vacuum devoid of thoughts. In Oursler's work, the video takes over the viewers. His great effort and persistence, since the 90s, in "wanting to fill the spectator's body"[86] bears fruit. He transforms the spectator into an actor, an active participant, violating the power structure of technology.

In his older installations such as *The Watching* (1992)[87], *System for Dramatic Feedback* (1994)[88], or even *The Philosophers* (1996)[89], "the spectator is often totally immersed, both physically and psychologically, as synaesthetic effects are mixed with a pre-mediated search for surprise and stupor. The lack of association between images and sounds works on different levels. The spectator is obliged to take in the different fields through which the piece is developed – sometimes even on different floors of the same building. This is all about the moving from within space and time, which inevitably creates fractures in our systems of perceptions. At the same time, the different projections, not always synchronized, propose non-lineal narrative that seem to clash."[90] From the clash and the cross-fertilization of media, in Oursler's hybrid installations, emerges a "meta-language that affects our perceptions, and

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[84] Panera, Tony Oursler: Mirada Pensante = Thinking Gaze, 113.
[85] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT press, 2001) 95-96.
[86] Panera, Tony Oursler: Mirada Pensante = Thinking Gaze, 114.
[87] Tony Oursler, "The Watching," Tonyoursler.com, Video, February 20, 1990, 1:11, https://tonyoursler.com/the-watching (accessed October 3, 2020).
[88] Tony Oursler, "System for Dramatic Feedback," Tonyoursler.com, Video, May 1, 1994, 5:08, https://tonyoursler.com/system-for-dramatic-feedback (accessed October 3, 2020).
[89] Tony Oursler, "Tony Oursler retrospective opens at kaohsiung museum of fine arts in Taiwan," Designboom, https://www.designboom.com/art/tony-oursler-retrospective-kaohsiung-museum-fine-arts-taiwan-01-17-2021/ (accessed October 3, 2020).
[90] Panera, Tony Oursler: *Mirada Pensante = Thinking Gaze*, 114.

challenges, not only the viewers' abilities to think and discuss, but also, the traditional model of representation and perception:"[91] the one where seeing is believing.

The human body (eye, face, mouth) is a very critical component and present in his work. He "anthropomorphizes his sculptures"[92] by chaotically arranging his devices to act as absurd substitutes of the body[93]. Oursler uses, as surfaces for projections, strange, hybrid, immobile, disembodied, and "organ less"[94] bodies. These are often wooden puppets, rag dolls, or even just simple surrogate clothes, as seen in *System for Dramatic Feedback*[95]. Even though these figures seemingly come alive, they still remain statue-like as if entrapped or paralyzed in their new and objectified bodies. Oursler is also engrossed "in the way faces transmit emotions and messages."[96] They are membranes, interfaces that mediate the flow of information in and out, says Oursler.[97] "Gaze meets gaze,"[98] as the spectators react "to the contorted facial expressions, cries, and aggressive insults of 'talking dolls', [or effigies, as Oursler likes to call them], with nervous laughter of startled awareness."[99]

Undoubtedly, this visual and sonic encounter tends to stir up intense personal responses, create states of mental confusion, increasing uneasiness and turmoil. His goal: perturb "the nervous system by trying to capture and lure the spectator into a "vortex of psychological

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[91] F. Javier Panera and Omar-Pascual Castillo, "When Everything Mixes and Cancels itself Out. Linguistic Expansion and the Epistemology of the Gaze in the work of T. Oursler," in *Tony Oursler: Mirada Pensante = Thinking Gaze* (Madrid: Turner, 2008), 146.

[92] Demetrio Paparoni*, "Tony Oursler and the Mythical Image," in *Tony Oursler: Open Obscura,* 21.

[93] Tony Oursler, "Tony Oursler: Dispositifs," Jeu de Paume, http://www.jeudepaume.org/index.php?page=document&idArt=45&idDoc=39 (accessed October 3, 2020).

[94] The "organ less "body expresses the French schizophrenic poet Antonin Artaud's vehement protest. He contested that the body isn't just reduced to a hierarchical sovereignty of organs. Entirely configured by the imagination, Antonin Artaud refers to a phantasmal conception of a body, solely ordered by impulses and perceptions.

[95] Tony Oursler, "System for Dramatic Feedback," Tonyoursler.com, Video, May 1, 1994, 5:08, https://tonyoursler.com/system-for-dramatic-feedback (accessed October 3, 2020).

[96] Petra Heck, "Interview with Tony Oursler," in *I/0 Underflow*, edited by Jacqueline Grandjean (Amsterdam: Oude Kerk, 2015), 15.

[97] Denis Gielen and Tony Oursler, *Vox Vernacular: An Anthology* (Hornu: Mercatorfonds, 2013), 54.

[98] Suset Sanchez, "When Everything Mixes and Cancel Itself out: Linguistic Expansion and the Epistemology of the Gaze in the work of T. Oursler," in *Tony Oursler: Mirada Pensante / Thinking Gaze* (Madrid: Turner, 2008), 145.

[99] Nancy Tieken and Tony Oursler, "Interview," in *Resistance or Submission: Snatches of a Christian Conversation*, edited by Manon Blanchette (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1986), 62.

reactions."[100] Oursler plays on the collective unconscious phobia called automatonophobia, the fear of inanimate objects that come to life. Effigies that carry a history of malice are deep rooted in magical traditions and history. Child of pop culture and drawing upon it through horror films, Oursler turns innocuous objects into terrifying dolls, repositories of "malevolent projections or repressed desires, cravings and fantasies. [These effigies] catch the dark undertones ever present in his art."[101] Is the way these figures come to life related to the parallel process of their becoming more human? Musahiro Mori describes how the more human-like these figurines become the uncannier they become. Their resemblance to human beings allows us to transfer human motivations onto them, while the sense that they are 'other,' or not like us, nevertheless remains. As we transfer human motivations to them, drawn into believing that human traits exist in their resemblance to us, our uncanny doubt that they are different forces us to imagine, or invent, a dark emotion or motivation which can explain the source of their otherness.

Some people believe that the eye is the window to the soul. Paradoxically, when the eye is shot in a closeup, and projected onto a large sphere, it seems to almost lose its human quality. It becomes alien-like, creating an uncanny feeling. The eye, in turn, becomes an uncanny point of recognition, both human and other. Oursler likes to work around the eye, a sensory organ that expresses a hidden interior and acts as a junction between the outside world and our inner world. It is also an entering point, or contact point between the physical space and the artwork. In Oursler's series *Eyes* (1996-2005)[102], installed at the Jeu de Paume in 2005, numerous large floating globes, acting as eyes, receive on their convexed surfaces, a projection of a human eye, shot in close-up. On the sclera of the projected eyes, the spectator is able to see the reflection of video games, porn films, or horror movies. Here, Oursler's

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[100] Demetrio Paparoni, "Tony Oursler and the Mythical Image," in *Tony Oursler: Open Obscura,* 21.

[101] Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Alters, *ID: An International Survey on the Notion of Identity in Contemporary Art* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbe Museum, 1997), 72.

[102] Mathilde Roman, "Tony Oursler, Ces yeux qui nous regardent," Expo Revue, https://www.exporevue.com/magazine/fr/oursler.html (accessed October 3, 2020).

work is "a poetic critique of everything linked to the Orwellian figure of the Big brother, to all those forms of persuasion, whether covert or explicit, that aim for mind control. [Eyes], metaphorically refer both to God and to political power: [they] see, monitor and judge."[103] These above actions (seeing, monitoring, judging) have an effect on human behaviour, as did the Panapticon on prisoner's behaviour. The eye takes on the role of the central watching tower of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* talks about how a particular behaviour, through the Panopticon, is imposed on a particular human. The series *Eyes*, had a similarly imposing effect, disturbing the viewers mentally and physically while they walked through the installation.

Oursler is also fascinated by the relationship between body and technology. It started with his 'talking effigies' or dolls in the 90s, and, recently, Oursler has taken interest in the relationship between faces and software, related to the latest advances in technology, such as facial scanning softwares that measure biometric technology extends humans' psychological space, according to Oursler[104]. "A*gR_3"[105] is a series comprised of enormous painted wooden head 'sculptures,' with glued on photographs of human faces, sometimes painted with no features except the eye, and mouth replaced by video screens. Distressed voices emanate from these faces. On the face are " marks or nodes associated with different facial recognition systems."[106] These "hybrid faces are equally familiar and unnerving, piercing contemporary anxieties about privacy, surveillance, and identity."[107] The multimedia sculptured faces-reveal the cold razor blade of biometric analysis. These created digital masks

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[103] Demetrio Paparoni, "Tony Oursler and the Mythical Image," in *Tony Oursler: Open Obscura,* 19.

[104] Freire Barnes, "Tony Oursler Interview."Time Out, February 12, 2015. https://www.timeout.com/london/art/tony-oursler-interview-art-for-me-is-about-getting-out-of-myself-and-exploring (accessed March 7, 2021).

[105] Tony Oursler, "A*gR_3," Tonyoursler.com, https://tonyoursler.com/agr_3-madrid (accessed October 3, 2020).

[106] Tony Oursler, "Tony Oursler – template/variant/friend/stranger," Lisson Gallery, https://www.lissongallery.com/exhibitions/tony-oursler--5 (accessed October 3, 2020).

[107] Tony Oursler, "A*gR_3," Tonyoursler.com, https://tonyoursler.com/agr_3-madrid (accessed October 3, 2020).

are a reflection of "ourselves [seen] through the lens of machines." [108] They "invite the viewer

to glimpse themselves from another perspective, that of the machines we have recently

created,"[109] portraying, once again, the psychological dimension of human nature.

Oursler has an obsessive relationship with the ways technologies influence the human

psyche. When video technology appeared in the 70s, Oursler began videotaping, staged, tragi-

comic sketches that dealt with "existential malaise [that afflicts our] consumerist society [that

are] dominated by the escapist desires and pathological greed." [110] Topics such as madness,

desperation, the pressure of contemporary culture, and multiple personality disorder (MPD)

are discussed in *The Watching*[111] (1992). According to Oursler, MPD is directly related to the

advent of television and its subsequent extensions such as the internet and social medias. It

interests him as a sociological symptom. Oursler is inspired by stories that plague people in

daily life traumatic, some who suffer from mental illnesses, and uses these as material for his

artwork.

The depiction of, what Oursler calls, "inner worlds or psycho-landscapes,"[112] started with

his installation *L7-L5*[113](1984), where he depicts his interest in the field of psychology. This

small installation opened the way to future large-scale installations. The image leaves the flat

television screen and is projected in a multidimensional space. "The interview with Gloria,

[the main protagonist], is [projected] in a glass house, where broken glass reflects it

kaleidoscopically; this is a way of extending the space, but above all, of producing the

fragmentation of Gloria's portrait to reflect her schizophrenic personality."[114] *Judy*[115] (1994),

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[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Denis Gielen, Tony Oursler, *Vox Vernacular: an anthology*, *Vox Vernacular: An Anthology* (Hornu: Mercatorfonds, 2013), 9.

[111] Tony Oursler, "The Watching," https://tonyoursler.com/the-watching (accessed October 3, 2020).

[112] Elizabeth Janus and Tony Oursler, "Talking Back: A Conversation with Tony Oursler," Tony Oursler. https://tonyoursler.com/talking-back-a-conversation-with-tony-oursler (accessed October 3, 2020).

[113] Tony Oursler, "Imponderable with L7-L5," Tonyoursler.com, Video, May 27, 2017, 2:02, https://tonyoursler.com/imponderable-with-l7-l5- (accessed October 3, 2020).

[114] Denis Gielen, essay on Tony Oursler in *Vox Vernacular: An Anthology* (Hornu: Mercatorfonds, 2013), 10.

another example of Oursler's interest in mental disorders, is an installation, where the main character, Judy, is psychologically alienated as seen by the way "she" is placed, as an effigy, under a couch, as if crushed by it. She shouts: "Hey you! Get Out! What are you looking at? I'll fuck you later! Leave me alone! " Each smaller scaled installations, within the L7-L5 induce a 'fragmented narrative' and reinforces Judy's multiple personality disorder. Intensely gripped by the human mental disorder conditions, Oursler plunges more deeply into the realms of the human mind with his installation *Lock 2,4,6*[116] (2009), at the Kunsthaus-Bregenz in Austria, where, in the bottom floor, sculptures, videos, and sound intertwine in a narrative cocktail of obsessive compulsive disorders, related to sex, drugs, gambling, and security. Some of "his first, macabre fantasies and obsessional performance videotapes, were not that far removed from the method of psychodrama invented by the American psychoanalyst Jacob Levy Moreno, where a protagonist, or patients present their problems, in theatrical improvisations, revealing their neuroses."[117]

It seems that Oursler adapted these theatrical improvisations and turned them into performances in his environmental theatrical set-ups, where he engages all of the viewers' senses. Moving images such as film and television are simulacra and revolve around the notion of persistence of vision and the willing suspension of disbelief, something that Hollywood exploits and was criticized by Guy Debord in his book *The Society of the Spectacle*. Oursler stays true to his principle of trying to break down belief systems. His work is very theatrical and refers to Bertolt Brecht's notion of the distancing effect, also known as the alienation, or the estrangement effect. The distancing effect is a technique used in theater and cinema that prevents the audience from losing itself completely in the narrative. Instead, it makes sure that the viewers become a conscious critical observer. Oursler uses various

[115] Tony Oursler, "Judy," Tonyoursler.com, Video, March 1, 1994, 6:50, https://tonyoursler.com/judy (Accessed October 3, 2020).
[116] Tony Oursler, "Lock 2,4,6," Tonyoursler.com, Video, October 24, 2010, 7:39, https://tonyoursler.com/lock-246-austria (accessed October 3, 2020).
[117] Denis Gielen, essay on Tony Oursler in *Vox Vernacular: An Anthology*, (Hornu: Mercatorfonds, 2013), 10.

devices and set-ups as tools to emancipate the viewers' minds from mental slavery triggered

by the entertainment and spectacle society. A lot of Oursler's artworks revolve around

television, and for Kenneth White, Ousler "stages a kind of return of repressed 'seeing at a

distance' (to follow the etymology of the German *Fernshen*, television, literally seen from

afar) and its present legacy of mimetic technologies employed for the lucrative extraction of

attention."[118] Also, to break the illusion effect, further, Oursler makes sure that the technology

used in his installations is well exposed so as not to fool the viewers, and to help them

understand what is happening in his installations.

Even though my adventure with Tony Oursler's artwork began precariously, I have come

to appreciate it. His *oeuvre* has influenced me to the point of inspiring my installations and

artworks. Interested in all sorts of spaces, Oursler pays particular attention to psychological

spaces by delving into the realms of the human mind using the raw material of life including

people's psychological mental disorders. Fascinated by MMPI (the Minneapolis Multi-Phasic

Personality Inventory, a test used to determine personality disorders), Oursler directly

engages "the viewer, which, in general, is always a goal of [his]. [He] thinks of it as a trap, in

a way, exploiting the nature of the mind, much like persistence of vision in film."[119] Through

the use of narratives and images in an exhibition space that could be considered as a 'world

theatre' or an 'operating theatre,' where the viewer ends up as an involuntarily actor, Oursler

creates mental spaces.

Oursler's interests are varied. They include the "hallucinatory effects of drugs and

psychotropic medications; the limitations and potential of memory and the unconscious; the

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[118] Kenneth White, "Until you get to know me: Tony Oursler's aetiology of television," *Reviews in Millennium film Journa*l 1, no. 57, (2013), 75.

[119] Tony Oursler, and Elizabeth Janus, "Talking Back: A Conversation with Tony Oursler," in Williams College Museum of Art, April 4, 2010, https://tonyoursler.com/talking-back-a-conversation-with-tony-oursler (accessed October 3, 2020).

states of mind such as insecurity, anxiety, the fear of solitude."[120] As such, Oursler is

fascinated by the ongoing themes of madness, desperation, and the pressure of a fast-paced

contemporary culture, which is consistently manipulated and scrutinized by social media and

mass telecommunications, and to which society is addicted. With the advent of new

technologies, new issues arise, such as identity, privacy, and hacking that Oursler has

integrated in his artwork.

Oursler is also obsessed with peripheral vision and sound within liminal spaces. He

considers these zones, the in-betweens, crucial to his installation works, because they capture

the viewers' attention. Viewers are captivated by his installations' play on this peripheral

notion, visually and sonically, as in *Judy*[121] (1994) that is arranged in a diagonal line

composed of, side-by-side, installations. The sound acts in the same way. Coming from the

peripheries, it contaminates the other installation, thereby competing for the viewers'

attention, pushing them further into an unstable state. He is not afraid of technologies, but, on

the contrary, he praises, embraces, and plays with them. Interested when technology leaps,

from old to new, Oursler invests these new spaces as a free of creative playground rules,

where these newly opened-up spaces are invested with his themes and notion challenging

artworks, before they become too corporatized and monetized. Interested in the impact of

technology on humans and their behaviour, both physically and psychologically, his

installation art are constructed in such ways that they stimulate "reflection and [question] the

intersection of culture and technology."[122] He also questions the notion of building

constructed worldviews through technology.

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[120] Demetrio Paparoni, "Tony Oursler and the Mythical Image" in *Tony Oursler: Open Obscura*, edited by Demetrio Paparoni and Gianni Mercurio (Milano: Ore Cultura, 2011), 14.

[121] Tony Oursler, "Judy," Tonyoursler.com, Video, March 1, 1994, 6:50, https://tonyoursler.com/judy (accessed October 3, 2020).

[122] Petra Heck, "Interview with Tony Oursler," in *I/0 Underflow*, edited by Jacqueline Grandjean (Amsterdam: Oude Kerk, 2015).

His fundamental questioning is around the ethos of a society, its past or present belief systems. People perceive smoothness and rationality in our present day society, when actually it is the contrary. "If you bother to scratch the surface, it turns out that high percentages of people believe in ESP, UFOs, ghosts, and one in three does not believe in evolution."[123] Things don't appear as what they seem, everything seems to quickly brake down. This zone, this threshold, this space created by this dichotomy of appearances, rational on the outside, irrational on the inside, captivates Oursler's attention and his curiosity.

More than just video installations, Oursler's art installations are "video environments," engaging the viewers on multisensory levels. Video is resolutely a time-based art. A question that arises is whether or not video carries within itself, the totality of the arts as it is difficult to define its boundaries. Can video be a total art? It seems to me that Oursler's artistic *oeuvre* is close to a total art, in the Wagnerian sense, because he combines painting, sculpture, architecture, theater, music, cinema, photography, sounds, and texts, all at once, to stimulate all of the viewers' senses.

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[123] Maika Pollack, « Interview of Tony Oursler. » Bomb magazine, July 18, 2016, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/tony-oursler/ (accessed March 7, 2021).

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Curriculum Vitae

Education:

2018-2020   The Western University of Ontario, Masters of Fine Art in Visual Arts, London, ON.

2014-2016   University Paris 8, Masters of Arts and Masters of Fine Arts, Paris, France.

1993-1995   Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, The Degree of Associate of Science in Photography, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

1984-1989   The University of Calgary, Bachelor of Arts in Leisure, Tourism and Society, Calgary, Alberta.

Solo Exhibitions:

2020   *Pharmakon: Acts, Traces and Maps*, Satellite Gallery, London, Ontario.

2017   *Polèmes*, La Coupole, University Paris 8, Saint Denis, France.

2017   *Involontary Sculptures/Sculptures Involontaires*, Library, University Paris 8, Saint Denis, France.

2010   *The North Star Project*, American Library, University Paris 8, Paris, France.

2009   *The Lost & Found Project*, Divan du Monde, Paris, France.

2007   *Samu Social Mali*, Rencontres Photographiques Africaines, Bamako, Mali

2005   *4 pattes, 2 roues,* Les Invalides, Ecole Militaire, Paris, France.

Group Exhibitions:

2021   *Distance*, Art Lab, Western University, London, Ontario.

2020   *The Subterraneans*, Le bar à Bulle, Paris18, France.

2019   *what we might become*, Art Lab, Western University, London, Ontario.

2019   *Selsun Blue*, Curated by Liza Eurich, Art Lab, Western University, London, Ontario.

2018   *Un Mur d'images,* Nuit Blanches, Rotonde, Stalingrad, Paris, France, http://www.diaph8.org/catalogue-nuit-blanche-diaph-8/

2018   *Photoactivity*, ALMA espace d'art, Paris**,** France.

2017   *Regarde-moi ça*, Mains d'œuvres, Saint-Ouen, France.

2016	*Trans Parens*, JEEP (Journée Européenne des Écoles de la Photographie), Le Centquatre, Paris, France.
2014	*Shadow & Light*, Galerie Art Vivienne, Paris, France.
2012	*Odyssées*, Galerie Art Vivienne, Paris, France.
2011	*Dreamland*, Galerie 3F, Paris, France.
2010	*Objets Trouvés à Paris***,** Les Photaumnales, Beauvais France.
2009	*Liens*, La Péniche Cinema, Cinema Paris et Court-métrage, Paris, France.
2009	*Objets Trouvés à Paris*, Regards, Rencontres Photographiques, Villeneuve-de-la-Rivière, France.
2008	*Underground Stills*, Artempo, festival d'art contemporain, Cugnaux, France.

Awards:

2018	Western Graduate Research Scholarship, Western University, London, ON
2017	FSDIE (Fonds de solidarité et de développement des intiatives étudiantes), University of Paris 8, Paris, France
2016	FSDIE (Fonds de solidarité et de développement des intiatives étudiantes), University of Paris 8, Paris, France

Publications:

2020	*The Subterraneans*, Ecart publication, Paris, France
2012	Catalogue for the exhibition *Victor Chocquet, ami et collectionneur des impressionnistes*. Publisher Winterthour, Geneva, Switzerland
2007	*Objets Trouvés à Paris*, publisher: Parigramme, Paris, France

Selected experience:

2018-2020	Teaching Assistantship, Western University, London, ON
1995-2017	Freelance photographer (Elle, Marie-Claire, Le Monde, Le Nouvel Observateur, L'Express, The Independent, The Miami Herald, Peugeot, France Telecom, Axa, RTE, Fondation Caisse d'Epargne, Fondation Ronald MacDonald, Groupe Accor
2011-2013	President of Striped Swans Association
2002-2013	Photography teacher, Fleury-Mérogis carceral system, Fleury-Mérogis, France

2003-2004   Picture Tank Independent Agency, Administrator, Coordinator, and commissioner, Paris, France

1996-1997   Pix Agency, editor and Iconographer, Paris, France