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Urge Overkill

Tony Oursler talks to David Rimanelli about phone sex, cigarettes, and money

By David Rimanelli

Over this spring and summer, I met with Tony Oursler in his Chinatown studio to check out his most recent work. The images and themes derive from mobile phones, softcore porn, accumulated garbage, and money. At the conclusion of each viewing, we taped our conversations about Oursler's distinctive projected installations, the thinking behind them, and issues of fabrication, among other topics. Our chats ranged freely from text messaging to obsessive-compulsive disorder, from horror movies to horror vacui, from Conceptual art to antibacterial lotions. Out of the seeming morass of our mental perambulations, however, a sense of just what was at stake in Oursler's latest corpus gradually emerged. Below, a brief sampling. -David Rimanelli

David Rimanelli: You're unhappy.

Tony Oursler: Yeah, but why are you unhappy? Symptoms are interesting, they're all over these new installations. But symptoms are only interesting if there is a new trauma to explore. A new space that may strike a resonant chord, lead to a new point of view. It has to flow back into everyday life, otherwise we have a perpetually phobic position.

A nonstop adrenal flow without insight or reflection.

DR: A perpetually phobic speedball.

TO: David, you watch a lot of movies; people are obsessed with cell phones in horror movies, why?

DR: Yeah, cell phones have become a horror-movie motif. Random, and often deadly. But the spirit world typically makes use of the latest technology to transmit its messages, at least in horror movies. Telephones, lighting fixtures, TV sets, videocassettes, answering machines, fax machines, computers – duh - and cell phones. No more being shut up in some rickety old mansion; the demons and ghosts of today are on the go, mobile, wherever you are they are. So modern.

TO: Instantly attached to the whole world. The cell phone is like a contaminating hole opening into your life, that's the modern horror. Nondifferentiation. My new body of work comes out of that confusion. How do we restructure personal space?

DR: It's commonplace to say that we live in a failed future, quite banal, but what did people do when there were no cell phones? I know what I did before there were cell phones. I didn't talk on the phone all the time or send text messages constantly. I don't even like talking on the phone. It's a life placebo.

TO: One needs protection ... I'm getting to the point where I don't like it very much

either, 'cause I like to be with people. That's why I wanted to make the giant cell phone series - this one is cherry red - with their screens showing soft-core "performances" of the sort you can check out on YouTube. Apparently, you can't get any real porn on YouTube, just pretty lame stuff...not quite even *Wild on the Beach in Cancun*. Today the phone is a transitional object, very creative for the user but a nondifferentiation fetish machine. I like to think about sex and phones; they don't seem to go together, but then it starts to get strange, interesting.

DR: I'm starting to get a creepy feeling that I have a homeless-man cell phone. It's the only one I've ever had, and I know plenty of people who seem to lose theirs almost on a weekly basis. Anyway, it's basically busted at this point. It's *taped* together. I guess my phone is a horror movie in the making.

TO: So, OK, if technology is an extension of the human psyche, then it mutates the human psyche to fit its own structure, right? The human psyche is interpolated through the electronics, the device, and then you have some interesting social anomalies. Chronic reliance on compromised forms of interaction.

DR: Yes, but then it just becomes another way of translating your own low- or high-grade psychic disturbances. It's just a new tool, but the underlying mental sludge, how much is that transformed by the medium? Big question, more than I can handle. If you have a tendency, unfortunately, to suffer mood instabilities of an acute type that make you kind of bummed out and agitated and angry and sharp, then I suppose the phone could be a weapon. But that isn't new. For example, *Dial M for Murder* or *Sorry*. What has changed is the proliferation of mediums through which one can express, uh, one's disaffections. You know, calling people up and leaving angry messages on their answering machines or voice mail. You send them terse bitchy text messages. Banal, really, but compelling-banal, because this is the junk of everyday life.

TO: What about pictures?

DR: Pictures?

TO: You could have angry pictures.

DR: Don't know. Maybe some people do. I guess you could, though it seems kind of silly. The whole idea of phones now, the super-drag aspect, is that at any given moment people could be taking photos of you or videotaping you with their cell phones. This is profoundly disturbing. Just about anyone could be caught doing something that could be read as or actually is compromising. Because we have our private public lives too, you know, an in-between and ill-defined social arena. And someone could, I don't know, email problematic pictures to a bunch of people from their phones. So cell phones are a way of discrediting people or something. Tarnishing them. It makes people very paranoid. Like Foucault - he had no idea about the panopticon such as we experience it. It's not like this Jeremy Bentham thing at all. It's about camera phones.

TO: Global panopticon, free-form, not connected to architecture. There is nothing left to hide; here we find the new psyche. This is where I want my new projections to shine, that's my fantasy.

CIGARETTES

TO: So here we are some weeks later. We have been looking at the cigarette projections. Different brands have been videotaped slowly burning and then projected to scale on to freestanding columns of various heights. The effect is seamless. The cigarettes form a forest somehow.

DR: I related them to these architectural pillars. Some vague memory of Art History 101. Ancient Egyptian temples, specifically that huge one in Thebes, Karnak. The architectural style, as I recall, is "hypostyle" - mad columns, very tall. And then a certain mosque, filled with columns. Spooky, spiritual, powerful. Superabundance of columns, most of them nonstructural, as divinity decor.

TO: You have to walk through the cigarette columns to get around the exhibition. They're all verticality, connecting sky to earth, smoke stacks but more personal. They are on some kind of human scale, a measuring stick. You hear a sucking sound, a subtle crackling when they burn in forward and reverse. The walls are foggy with overlapping projections of smoke. What else?

DR: Not wanting to see things go from the outside to the inside.

TO: Or vice versa.

DR: It's conventional not to want to see things that are inside come out. Understandable. Sometimes it's also unnerving to see things go in. Watching other people eat can be gross. Never understood why people think going out to dinner is a smart idea for a, hmm, a date?

TO: An American just won the hot-dog-eating contest again. Goes back to this prophylactic idea. You've got the inside, the outside, and then this mediator governing our connection to the world, in this case an oral link. I like cigarettes for their pedestrian quality, nothing illegal or back-alley about them, yet they're super complex, and new research shows them to be almost instantly addicting.

MONEY

TO: I'm shooting footage of the Queen tomorrow.

DR: Really? You mean THE queen - Elizabeth II?

TO: Yes and no. *This* queen is perfect. This actress is not royalty as far as I know but plays royalty on TV. In my piece she plays the Queen on a pound note.

DR: How many pounds?

TO: She gets around; now I'm shooting the 10-pound note, which is really cool, and transparent when you hold it up to the light, with a watermark. I like the 10-pounder because you get the Queen, a hummingbird, and Darwin is on the flip side-what a threesome. Money is godlike in the culture today, moving from hand to hand exacting twists of fate.

DR: I want some ice cream...Money always smells of divinity or diabolism. The motto *pecunia non olet* seems rather dubious. Vague memory of some Mary Kelly preach-piece, *pecunia olet*, ergo money *does* smell. And smells nasty, presumably. I saw some cable documentary on, uh, drugs, and some guy at the DEA was explaining that many, *many* bills contain trace amounts of cocaine.

TO: Money should talk, probably will in the future.

DR: Success-is-in-you.com or something like that. People who say they don't measure success by how much money you make are *liars*. I hate that.

TO: You walk through the valley of failure and if you make it through there's a perfect you waiting. I think that's what we should call the show: "The Perfect You."

DR: That's a good idea. Well, you know we're always supposed to be testing ourselves against some kind of ideal. Which is, you know ... Let's just say it typically leads to disappointment, or worse.

TO: Perfection starts in the details. You have to start small, look clearly at the little things, viruses, body parts, wallpaper, pills, give them all the importance they deserve.

DR: What about the big picture?

TO: You're lost in the details - that is the big picture. In this exhibition, you have all these details up in your face and you have to find your own way. You're psychologically scale shifted, you paint the big picture yourself. It's a therapeutic model.

DR: How do I press delete on this thing?

TO: I want a Red Bull.

DR: Want, want, want.

TO: Delete, delete, delete .

Tony Oursler's work is on view at Lisson Gallery, London, through Oct. 3.