

# From the Simulacral Head to the Everyday Field: The Media Turn and Affective Mechanism in Tony Oursler's Video Installations

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## Abstract

This paper examines the development of Tony Oursler's video installation practice since the 1990s, focusing on how the artist persistently detaches the moving image from the fixed screen and relocates it onto effigies, readymade objects, everyday environments, and urban surfaces, thereby transforming the image from a flat pictorial entity into a spatial, material, and affective event. Analysing three major phases-Object Projection, Video Installation, and Outdoor Imaging-the study identifies four core creative strategies that evolve across these stages: head-centred projection, the integration of video and found objects, the installation of everyday materials in quotidian space, and the sound-driven construction of personified emotion. By tracing how these strategies shift from object adherence to spatial narration and ultimately to environmental intervention, the paper argues that Oursler develops a distinctive affective installation language marked by uncanny plausibility, proportional dislocation, virtual-real interpenetration, dark humor, and sensorial absurdity, reshaping the viewer's perceptual behavior by transforming viewing from a stable act of looking into an embodied process of encounter, adjustment, and emotional negotiation. The study concludes that Oursler's practice exemplifies a broader post-medium transformation in contemporary video art, wherein the moving image acquires material presence, spatial agency, and environmental permeability, and suggests that as the image increasingly intervenes in public space and everyday experience, Oursler's work offers a crucial lens through which to understand how contemporary visual culture redefines the boundaries of image, object, emotion, and reality.

## Keywords

Tony Oursler; Video Installation Art; Affective Installation; Object Projection; Post-Medium Condition.

## 1. Introduction

Since the late 20th century, with the rapid development of digital imaging, projection equipment, and spatial sensing technologies, video installation art has continuously pushed the boundaries of the fixed screen, shifting toward spatialised, objectified, and embodied modes of presentation. The American installation artist Tony Oursler occupies a pivotal position in this media transformation. Since the 1990s, centring on the motif of "head simulacra projection," he has combined projection with readymade objects, everyday spaces, and affective soundscapes to construct a composite media system that traverses video, sculpture, performance, and psychological perception. The highly recognisable facial projections, dislocated scaling, fragmented voice clips, and integration with low-tech effigies make the image no longer merely a "viewable picture" but an active spatial event that intervenes in reality and affects viewing behaviour.

This paper uses Oursler's practice since 1990 as a chronological axis, focusing on four continuously evolving creative methods in his work: the projection language centred on the human head, the pairing of images with found objects, the installation treatment of everyday objects in quotidian spaces, and the sound-driven mechanism for constructing personified emotion. Based on the progression of these methods, Oursler's work has broadly undergone three interconnected developmental stages: the exploration of "Object Projection", where projections adhere to physical objects, the "Video Installation" period, where images participate in constructing installation structures, and the "Outdoor Imaging" stage, where video intervenes in public spaces and urban ecology. Although the stages differ significantly in form and medium, the core problem consistently concerns how the image detaches from traditional framing and engages with the material and emotional dimensions of the real world. Therefore, this paper aims to examine, through a synthesis of these three stages, how Oursler utilises operations of image adherence, dislocation, expansion, and de-framing to gradually shift the image focus from dolls and everyday objects to public architecture and urban environments, thereby forming a unique "affective installation language". More importantly, Oursler's practice offers a crucial reference point for understanding the trajectory of the moving image in the post-medium context. Consequently, this study will revolve around the following questions: When the image detaches from its fixed screen and enters objects, installations, and even urban spaces, how does it alter the original visual structure and perceptual mechanism? How does the combination of image and sound generate personified and psychological affective effects? Do strategies such as the disjunction of virtual and real, proportional deformation, and environmental intervention constitute a new narrative mode in contemporary video installation? Moreover, how does Oursler's trajectory reveal the evolution of the image in contemporary art from mere picture to spatial event?

Through the discussion of the above questions, this paper seeks to reveal the new direction in video installation art represented by Oursler's works and its significance in contemporary visual culture, focusing on the intersection of technology, space, and affective structure.

## 2. Methodology and Literature Review



**Fig. 1** "L'archéologie des Fluides" (Fluid Archaeology), Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, 2024, Geneva

Tony Oursler's practice was understood within the theoretical framework of video installation art. As Wen (2021) suggests, when discussing the combination of performance, image, and installation, when video is layered with live action and spatial structures, time and space in the work cease to be linear, extended containers, becoming instead composite structures that are folded, compressed, and expanded within the apparatus itself [1]. Case analyses, such as those focusing on Joan Jonas, show that video installations can simultaneously create a "prolonged

sense of time" and a "contracted time span" through multi-screen juxtaposition, looping. The superposition of live action makes the viewer's movement and presence an integral part of the time-space structure. Oursler's attachment of projected images onto effigies, everyday objects, trees, or architectural surfaces similarly rewrites the perception of time and space through media combination: the looping of the head images, the fragmentation of sound, and the extension of the field transform what would be single playback time into an "experienced time" that flows with space, and convert a neutral site into a psychological space "occupied" by the image. Bahtsetzis (2022), discussing Deleuze's "time-image" in relation to installation art, argues that video installations, through multimodal integration, often move away from narrative storytelling, generating meaning instead through the continuous flow of "pure time" and the viewer's embodied movement [2]. From this perspective, the constantly drifting heads, the audio-visual dislocation of voices, and the audience's walking route in Oursler's work can be understood as a "meta-cinematic framing": the image is no longer confined to a single frame. However, it is continuously reframed within the installation space, with the viewer's body serving as the second "lens".

Furthermore, Wolke et al. (2024), adopting a cross-disciplinary approach between physics and art, discuss the inherent link between optical experimentation and light art installations, noting that optical phenomena such as projection, refraction, and reflection serve both as technical means and aesthetic strategies in contemporary installations [3]. Applying this view to Oursler's case, his selection of projection surfaces (cloth dolls, plastic, tree bark, walls) is itself an "optical experiment": the absorption, scattering, and deformation of light by different materials cause the head image to produce a ghostly distortion on the surface, thereby intensifying the perceptual tension between the real and the fictitious within the work. In sum, this paper uses the extension and contraction of time-space, the Deleuzian time-image, and the interdisciplinary perspectives of optics and installation as its theoretical foundation to understand how Oursler constructs his unique video installation grammar through the relationships among the projection medium, material surfaces, and the viewer's body.

Circulating the general research on video installation art, existing literature primarily concentrates on three areas. The discussion represented by Kaye (2008) primarily analyses the "sense of presence," sound structure, and "uncanny" experience in Oursler's work, highlighting its affective and psychological dimensions [4]. Secondly, the video installation studies by Wen (2021) and Bahtsetzis (2022) primarily construct theoretical frameworks for understanding video installation from the perspectives of time-space structure and the viewer's subjective experience [1-2]. Thirdly, the interdisciplinary research represented by Wolke et al. (2024) emphasises the experimental correlation between optics and installation [3]. Compared to these achievements, what remains relatively lacking is a longitudinal analysis of Oursler's trajectory since 1990 around the central motif of "head projection-readymade objects-everyday space-public environment," as well as a systematic analysis of the internal logic among his four creative methods: human head projection, the combination of projection and readymade objects, the installation treatment within everyday spaces, and the sound-dominated construction of affect. This paper seeks, based on the aforementioned research, to re-examine Oursler's three-stage practice-Object Projection, Video Installation, and Outdoor Public Imaging-from the intersecting perspectives of temporal stages and technical methods, exploring how he consistently rewrites the relationship between image and object, space and audience, and technology and emotion within the framework of video installation art.

### 3. 1990–1994: The Uncanny Plausibility of "Object Projection"



**Fig. 2** White Trash, Tony Oursler, JGM Galerie & Campoli Presti, France, 2013

During the "Object Projection Period" between 1990 and 1994, Tony Oursler began to move the image "out" from the flat screen, projecting it directly onto cloth dolls and everyday objects, thereby creating a hybrid form situated between sculpture and video. Works such as *White Trash* (1993) and *Flowers* (1994) are representative of this era; they share the basic structure of a recorded human head image precisely projected onto a doll's head, a gap in a mattress, or a plastic flower bouquet, thereby lending "expression" and "voice" to these otherwise silent objects. From a presentation perspective, Oursler intentionally selects carriers that appear compatible with the image's logic, making the work seem "plausible at first glance". For instance, a cloth doll already implies a body, and the projected image fills in only the "missing head"; similarly, a head peering out from under a mattress or the centre of a bouquet illuminated by projection corresponds to scenarios found in daily experience. It is precisely within this superficial plausibility that a sense of the uncanny subtly generates: the imbalance in the head's proportion, the mismatch between light and material, and the gap between the expression and the effigy's body constantly remind the viewer that this is an object "possessed by an image," rather than a complete person[5]. The audience's psychological experience typically unfolds along the trajectory of "abruptness-scrutiny-knowing smile". Upon first entering the exhibition, the appearance of a human head within a doll, a mattress, a suitcase, or a bouquet causes an instant jolt and unease, which stems from the head's "dislocated" presence. Subsequently, the audience instinctively approaches and pauses, attempting to discern the facial expression, lip movements, and vocal content. During this close inspection, they gradually recognise the technical means and organisational logic—the position of the projector, the selection of material texture, and the correspondence between image and object. Once the mechanism is identified and the form "read," the initial sense of astonishment is often replaced by a knowing smile tinged with self-mockery: the audience realises they have been "tricked" while simultaneously acknowledging that these slightly absurd combinations reveal the emotional undercurrents often overlooked in daily experience. Consequently, the works of this period do not merely pursue horror or the grotesque but generate tension between "seemingly plausible everyday objects" and the "clearly incongruous projected human head". Through this state hovering between the real and the fictional, Oursler successfully converts the audience from passive viewers into active "investigators"; the abruptness captures them, completes the process of perception and comprehension through scrutiny, and realises with a knowing smile how their own viewing habits and psychological defences have been subtly subverted. This subtle psychological path, constructed around the relationship among the effigy, the object, and

the projection, serves as the foundational logic for Oursler's subsequent video installation practice.

#### 4. 1995–1999: The Video Installation Period – Dark Humor and Spatial Drama in Proportional Dislocation



**Fig. 3** Photo of the exhibition *Eyes*, Metro Pictures, New York, Tony Oursler, 1996



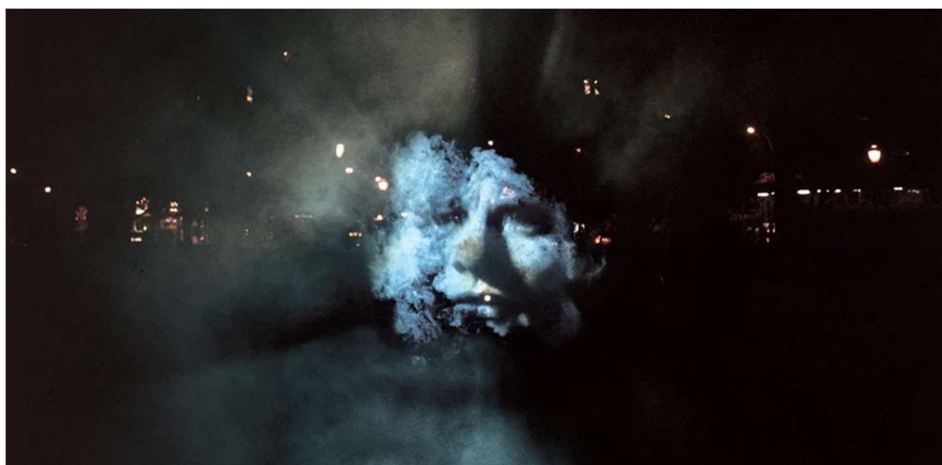
**Fig. 4** Photo of the exhibition *Still Lives and Skulls*, Metro Pictures, New York, Tony Oursler, 1998

Entering the period of 1995–1999, Tony Oursler's work gradually shifted from the early "image possession" to more complex video installation structures. Works from this stage, such as *Eyes* (1996) and *Skull and Still Life* (1998), demonstrate his reshaping of the image-object relationship: the image is no longer merely projected onto a single carrier but collaborates with the object to construct the installation's own narrative tension. The objects selected are often deeply metaphorical—suitcases, plastic dolls, spheres, and skull models. When these elements, which are both quotidian and highly symbolic, are layered with the projected image, they activate new layers of imagery: the image becomes the object's substitute, and the object, in turn, provides a dramatic setting for the image, causing the viewer to oscillate between familiarity and alienation. Concurrently, Oursler's manipulation of proportional relationships grew bolder during this period, with the "oversized" and "undersized" elements in the formal structure serving as primary psychological triggers. In *The Melancholy Man*, the vast head and



the childishly minute body create an absurdly disproportionate differential, allowing emotion to occupy the installation's subject exaggeratedly. In *Eyes*, spheres of various sizes carry huge, hyper-realistic eye images, making the viewer feel as if they are facing a hierarchically dislocated "gazing system". Moreover, in *Skull and Still Life*, the massive skull form creates a subtle counterpoint with the moving expressions of the projection. These proportional differences not only result in visual incongruity but also intensify the emotional, textual, and symbolic content through structural imbalance, generating a psychological tension that the audience cannot ignore. Beyond proportional dislocation, he also began to develop a spatial rhythm in his works created by the joint effect of "large objects, small objects, and sound". For example, the difference in volume between the large suitcase and the small cloth doll in *The Guardian* creates an absurd "sheltering relationship," while the projected sound-muttering, self-talk, and rainmbling-seems to seep out from the depths of the case, making the audience feel as if they have intruded into a "physical space of inner emotion"[6]. The distribution of large and small spheres in *Eyes* forces the viewer to constantly gaze from different directions as they navigate the work, while the faint sound and light of each eye image act like spontaneous signs of life, structuring the work's rhythm through a "scattered distribution of sightlines" across the entire space. Pervading these structures is Oursler's increasingly pronounced dark humour during this period. Through exaggerated features, abrupt expressions, mismatched bodies, and emotional dialogue, the works, while laden with metaphors of fear, anxiety, and death, simultaneously exhibit a comical awkwardness. This humour is not lighthearted but rather exposes the latent psychological and social contradictions of everyday life through absurd combinations. The moment two effigies glance sidelong at each other in *The Melancholy Man* is both an emotional metaphor and a jest at the insecurities of daily life; the combination of a skull wearing jewelry in *Skull and Still Life* juxtaposes death and consumerism ironically; and the continuous rambling of the doll in the case in *The Guardian* presents vulnerability, solitude, and dependence with intense dramatic effect. Thus, the 1995–1999 video installation period marks the point where Oursler transformed the image from "an accessory layer to an object" into the "dominant mechanism of spatial narration". The combination of image and object, the dislocated proportional relationships, the rhythm jointly established by large and small objects and sound, and the sense of absurdity delivered by the dark humour all converged into a unique spatial drama, allowing the image to unfold its narrative among real physical materials, marking a critical turning point in Oursler's installation art language.

## 5. 2000 Onwards: The Outdoor Imaging Period – Image Liberation from the Carrier and the Absurd Reality of Spatial Drama



**Fig. 5** The Influence Machine, New York, Tony Oursler, 2000

After 2000, Tony Oursler's practice officially transitioned from indoor installations to the open urban environment, resulting in a fundamental expansion of image scale, projection methods, and media structures. The Influential Mechanical (2000), which served as the starting point for this period, projected colossal human faces onto trees, building facades, and public vegetation structures. For the first time, the image truly detaches from the solid carrier, entering the urban dynamic which possesses its own temporal rhythm. In such works, the relationship between time and space is no longer unilaterally set by the artist but is co-generated by the image and the environment: the swaying of leaves alters the image texture, the depth of the night affects the expression's mood, and the wind, light, and city sounds become implicit soundtracks, lending the work a spatio-temporal quality that "cannot remain static". The image is no longer a supplement to a specific object. However, it becomes a temporary attachment to both urban and natural structures, carrying a ghostly presence that redefines itself in a constantly changing environment. One of the core features of this outdoor imaging is the complete removal of the image's original frame. Unlike traditional image art, Oursler no longer uses flat screens or predefined projection surfaces but utilises tree crowns, bridge piers, and building facades as projection interfaces, making the image directly participate in the material structure of the real space. Shadows of branches become the depths of the character's eye sockets, damage on the building surface becomes cracks in the skin, and the texture reflected by the projection is both the image's structure and the object's texture. In this process of "image reflecting matter," reality and fiction intertwine in a highly intimate manner. The colossal skulls and faces in St. Roth (2008) and New Zealand Project (2008) exemplify this "amalgamation of disparate forms" effect: they do not appear to float above the city but seem to generate from within the trees, like spiritual entities awakened in the natural terrain, possessing both a mythical visual effect and an ambiguous texture where it is difficult to distinguish between reality and image. Simultaneously, Oursler gradually developed a visual language approaching an "animation-inspired" style during this period. The exaggerated deformation of the face, the intense colour contrast, and the dramatic expression of the eyes and mouth lend these projected faces a cartoon-like performativity. They are neither quite human nor entirely fictional characters, but "animated spirits" appearing on real giants, exhibiting a mixed style that is simultaneously childlike and frightening. This visual language not only creates interesting interactions with diverse crowds in public spaces but also reinforces the image's "environmental permeability" through estrangement. As the public walks past these projections, they are momentarily captured by a slightly absurd yet captivating sign of life-buildings blink, trees talk, and bridge piers breathe with exaggerated, cartoon expressions. In terms of narrative structure, these outdoor video works generally exhibit the quality of a sensorial absurd drama. They lack complete stories, instead using fragmented, repetitive emotional expressions to constitute an open drama situated between performance and hallucination. In The Herb Garden Project (2010), two enormous faces projected into a dense woods whisper and gaze, as if engaged in a private conversation in the forest, with the audience's viewing acting as an accidental eavesdropping. From urban to natural environments, Oursler's outdoor video carries an emotional fragility within its absurdity: they are colossal yet soft, exaggerated yet delicate, presenting an unsettling yet strangely gentle sense of presence across the vast scale of the space. Therefore, the outdoor imaging period after 2000 is the critical stage in which Oursler fully liberated the image from the "object" and co-constructed a live theatre with the environment. Here, the image loses its frame, integrates into reality, generates visually indistinct effects of the real and the fictional within the material texture, and utilises animation-inspired language and an absurd emotional structure to reshape the way the city and nature are viewed, transforming the image into a sensory installation traversing public space-it is simultaneously transient and intense; technical and a surreal intervention possessing affective temperature.

## 6. Analysis and Discussion

Looking back at Tony Oursler's creative trajectory since 1990, a clear and continuously advancing Media Turn is evident: the image constantly escapes the grid constraints of the screen, leaves the flat interface of the "window," and enters the surface of objects, installation spaces, and even the urban environment. Superficially, this development manifests as an expansion of technical means, display scale, and field type. The deeper logic, however, lies in Oursler's consistent use of the "human head simulacrum" as a media agent, allowing the image to gain a continuous superposition of materiality, spatiality, and affectivity within different contexts, thereby constantly renegotiating the relationship between the image and the real world, and the image and the viewer. In this sense, his work is not merely a change in image presentation but a rewriting of the ontology of the image itself.

In the early effigy projections, the image adhered to the surface of soft objects, establishing an uncanny plausibility through this "seeming but not being real" fit: dolls, mattresses, and plastic flowers were endowed with a head, expression, and voice, giving life-like signs to inanimate objects. The viewer's experience, therefore, always begins with abrupt disruption, gradually leading to comprehension and a knowing smile through scrutiny and identification. The image here is both an activation of the object and a subtle subversion of the viewer's psychological defenses, making the viewing process itself an essential component of the work. This psychological mechanism was further expanded into a spatial experience during the mid-period video installations: the image no longer adhered to a single object but entered complex structures composed of suitcases, skulls, and spheres, shifting viewing from concentrated focus to dispersed movement. Proportional dislocation, the symbolic relationship between objects, and the introduction of sound jointly formed a structure of dark humor and absurd drama, enabling the image to organize narration within the space, and forcing the audience to constantly adjust their perceptual mode through action and movement.

Upon entering the public space, the image completely broke free from the controllable solid carrier, unfolding on tree crowns, bridge piers, and building surfaces, co-generating rapidly changing visual environments with natural light, wind, and shadows. The boundaries of the image are thoroughly dissolved here; it no longer derives meaning through an object but gains an "environmentalized image" form within the texture of the environment itself. Exaggerated expressions, a cartoon-like visual language, and fragmented emotional expressions render the image as a semi-autonomous entity situated between organism and symbol in the urban space, leading the audience to encounter it during their everyday movement, rather than to intently view it. Thus, the image shifts from an autonomous medium to a behavioral medium, from an object requiring "viewing" to an event "occurring" in the urban environment.

Synthesizing this thirty-year development, Oursler's work reveals a crucial shift in the image in the post-medium era: the image moves from flat picture toward an embodied, spatialized, and environmentalized existence. The image no longer primarily performs narrative or representational functions but constitutes a new affective structure, behavioral structure, and spatial structure through its mode of appearance. The relationship between image and object progresses from adherence to co-construction; the relationship between image and space progresses from display to generation; and the relationship between image and audience progresses from gaze to encounter. These changes not only lend significance to Oursler's work in terms of material experimentation and formal innovation but also establish it as a methodological entryway for observing the transformation of contemporary visual culture.

Oursler's creative contribution is evident not only in his successful establishment of an "affective installation language" composed of exaggerated proportions, virtual-real interweaving, dark humor, and absurd dramatic structures, but more profoundly in his continuous testing of the viewer's perceptual threshold through the image, intervening in the



audience's bodily actions and psychological mechanisms, thereby transforming the viewing act itself from a fixed behavior into a forcibly expanded cognitive process. The audience's surprise, curiosity, confusion, and subtle smile become an inseparable part of the work's interactive mechanism, and one of the ways the image regains its relevance in the contemporary cultural context.

Ultimately, Oursler's artistic practice alerts us that in the present day, where images are ubiquitous and the city is increasingly screened and projected, the image's significance lies no longer in its content but in its mode of intervention in the world. When the image moves in the city, flickers on a tree, and breathes on a cloth doll, it not only changes the boundaries of art but also alters humanity's fundamental understanding of "what an image is". The image becomes an event that happens in the world, a force that reconstructs space, affect, and bodily perception, and a vital theoretical coordinate for future image-space studies. Oursler's work is thus not merely an extension of personal style but a response to the core issues of contemporary visual culture: in a world constantly reshaped by media technology, how does the image reshape reality, how is emotion given form, and how is viewing compelled to continuously update its own structure. These questions will continue to deepen in future artistic practice and urban media environments, and Oursler's work provides an insightful starting point for understanding these topics.

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