Interview

THE MACHINE'S POINT OF VIEW

By JULIA SCHER
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TONY OURSLER IN NEW YORK, APRIL 2015.
PORTRAITS BY ANTHONY BATISTA. STYLING BY
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Tony Oursler is perhaps one of the most widely
recognized new media artists, consistently challenging
and engendering conversations about the evolution of
surveillance. Beginning in the early 1980s, after
receiving his B.A. from Cal Arts and studying under
John Baldessari alongside the likes of Mike Kelly and

Jim Shaw, Oursler has worked with a range of mediums, from sculpture to video, performance, and painting. His most recent body of sculptures, which is currently on view at Lehmann Maupin in New York, addresses what he calls "new portraiture"—a type of self-reflection through data aggregation and the proliferation of facial recognition technologies.

In the works on view, the artist embeds video screens depicting mouths and eyes within large aluminum panels that are coated in metallic and reflective materials, effectively creating semblances of abstract portraits. These portraits also display the mapping of nodes used by facial recognition software, and as a whole, ask the viewer to not only consider technology, but also his or her own representation through software, privacy, and more likely, the lack thereof. Prior to the opening of the show, Oursler connected with his old friend and inspiration, artist Julia Scher, over the phone. He was in New York, on the Lower East Side; she was in Cologne, Germany.

JULIA SCHER: It's great to have you on the phone and get a chance to ask you some questions about the recent work.

OURSLER: I've really wanted to talk to you about the show we're doing at Lehmann Maupin because I know you've always been concerned with the way technology has become part of our social psycho-physical space. I became very fascinated with the way machines identify us and how that's changing the way we operate in public and private space. For many years, we used technology as a way of focusing our vision, but now I'm curious about the inversion, where the technology is looking back at us.

SCHER: You're using this endless, shifting projection in order to make clear or reify the eigenface and other facial recognition technologies. Could you elaborate a little bit about how you met the technology and then undo it using a projection?

OURSLER: When I was researching this I came upon images of the eigenface, which is a variation on mug shots. In the 1800s, the first notions of indexing humanity [began with] Bertillon criminals—I guess you could trace it back to phrenology—and various methods of tracking faces have been developed. The newer technology is able to index massive amounts of faces and cross-reference them. It's reading us in every format—video games, banking, Facebook, the deep face of Facebook, which has supposedly even outstripped the FBI.

SCHER: Could you explain that?

OURSLER: The eigenface is very similar to the early cataloguing system of faces, but struck me as a very poetic picture of the machine's vision of us. It started to trigger this train of thought, these spectral images stripped of anything we might consider human. I really felt like, "This is the first time I'm seeing the cold eye of a machine looking back at us." It struck me that this is a harbinger of a new way of seeing ourselves.

SCHER: There's a whole media archeology. It's chilling to hear the way you say it—the machine seeing you or looking back at you and the recognition it has. It's not human.

OURSLER: Not at all, and the basis of what the machine is looking at withers us down in an interesting way. It's the opposite of the way we look at each other to try and perceive information—we look for changes, change is life. But once you are in the system, the machine finds these points that don't move. You could almost say they are the least human aspects of being human. Then it

extrapolates and compares the differentiation between various faces—the width between the eyes and the mouth, these points that never change based on the skull, no matter what age you are. The biometrics are not limited to facial points. They go to genetics, odor, iris, skin, and things like this. They connect to a much larger database that searches shopping patterns, medical records, whatever can be aggregated and connected to, what I call, dead points.

From there you have this new portrait, which is what I'm interested in—what is the new notion of portraiture? Of identity? How people think about themselves? The machine helps us find ourselves. It's not completely dark, because I think there's a lot of potential for creativity, for connectivity, but there's also a very insidious boxing in of peoples' identities. We look in this machine mirror and it's a new portrait. In the past, your wrinkles, the background in the painting, your clothing, was the evidence used to contextualize you. Now it's opened up to this wide spectrum of genetic analysis, health patterns, education, and psychological tests.

SCHER: I have to admit, Netadis, the one facial recognition software we have here, has told me that I'm 74-years-old and male and don't get out much.

OURSLER: [*laughs*]

SCHER: I think these machines, and the data they're collecting, might be much more interested in youth—not the ravages of sunburn and DNA damage, [but rather] what pulls the attention of a young person's eye, the perspective of someone who might be doing something, whether it's altruistic or heroic, consensual or criminal.

OURSLER: Or more likely spending patterns of that young person. [*both laugh*]

SCHER: Have you pictured your own head in one of your machines?

OURSLER: I did one. I replaced my eyes with Kate Valk's eyes.

SCHER: Wow, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. The pressure upon us to believe in machines is undeniable. In contrast to phrenology and physiognomy, and how that was pictured in the 1800s, the shock of seeing the first image of "template/variant/friend/stranger," reminds me more of a sphinx whose thoughts we cannot read immediately. So although the numerical sequencing is supposed to portray internal characteristics, I was very struck by my inability to read it as well.

OURSLER: I think you hit on something interesting there, Julia, because the early interpretation of the cranium was people looking for universal areas. Like, "Okay this is the area where someone will fall in love, this is the area where they'll have good luck or bad luck. Here's the area where they'll have strength or weakness or sickness." There's this notion that everybody's the same. At a certain point, especially in America, everybody has to be ruthlessly, relentlessly individualistic. But what comes up with these giant databases is that one sees we are painfully the same—they're stripping the myth or the narrative away from identity and turning somebody into a programmable, predictable entity.

SCHER: I think the point that you're also referencing is over time, the notions of what an observer or observed is, has changed. A piece of equipment will note, for example, when your period is or if you have prostate cancer. As machines go deeper into the body, is our old fashion notion of observer and observed also changing?

OURSLER: Absolutely. People seem to have these new relationships to shame or to body imaging that didn't exist 25 years ago. It's changing at the same time as social norms of body identity. I'm sure sexual excitement could be readable by a machine quite easily, and of course, that's connected to buying patterns. It's always going to come from money first, and money will then force other research—even the notions of terror and terrorism. Massive amounts of money are given to companies to look for terrorists and for further surveillance. It goes hand in hand with economic growth.

SCHER: Do you think on the money side, the corporate side, that power is contributing to the results of computational ability? That your identity and data go to the cloud and you don't need documents that are analog?

OURSLER: Absolutely. The imaging is the metaphor for the ID tag. It won't have to necessarily come from a picture; it'll come from other tags that people have on their body or credit cards. You're such a techno wonk, I'm sure you've heard about all these things—little broadcast chips they can put into credit cards or into your body and then when you walk into a store, advertising will be customized for you and all this bullshit sci-fi stuff that link us to giant databases—who is going to have access to that? But I'm more interested in, poetically, what that means for how people are going to change their view of the world and of each other. The corporate side is pretty predictable in general, wouldn't you say?

SCHER: I wish I could have an answer for you. I know Bertrand Russell said to his grandparents, "What is mind? Does it matter? What is matter? Never mind!" And that's the end. Maybe we have such egos in believing we know so much and really we've just begun to learn about the universe.

OURSLER: Our relationship between this information and ourselves will be a really fascinating field for cultural and identity production. The way people figure out ways of blocking this data and working with the data will be quite interesting. Raw material is a kind of digital clay. The instantaneous quality of things like Facebook, I think, gives us a little bit of a hint. You know how an intimate moment can be massively seen? It's very similar to the very first events of telecommunication that happened, like the telegraph and television, and how these things permanently changed perspective and the way we look at the image and ourselves. I think, as you said, that right now we're being challenged and I'm not sure what's going to happen.

But I want to go back to the notion of privacy. What do you feel about that? This notion that nobody is unique anymore, it seems to go hand-in-hand with the idea that there's no privacy.

SCHER: There's a great number of people who believe privacy never really existed. In fact, privacy was a result of the invention of the chimney, which could be in separate rooms, so the whole family didn't have to sit around one central fire all the time. But that's a privacy that cannot be exploited by other people watching or overhearing something that you feel is sensitive. You're out of vision, out of mind.

OURSLER: Once it's imagined, it's public. I've asked a lot of young people who I've been around questions about pornographic pictures of themselves, and people say, "As soon as a picture is taken, you have to assume that it's going to be everywhere."

SCHER: I've had several incidents because of Google and things you never imagined happening. Speaking of art that was done in the '80s and '90s, the new technology can capture it and bring it into a whole new world, where, poetic or not, your image or text takes on a totally new meaning. That

kind of slippage is interesting. I wonder what the next event will be and the evolution of data and prejudice and exploitation.

OURSLER: That's the thing: we won't know what the new thing is until its happened, so I'm just sniffing around. We look back at ourselves in real time and it's almost like a digital mask that we're still decoding. This notion of a new identity is at hand but what it means? That, we may never know. You gotta just jump into the stream and see what happens. We'll just be able to see parts of it as we float through.

SCHER: In [these new works], something has been screened from view in a way that doesn't happen in some of the earlier pictures. It looks like it's not just an eyeball. It appears as if there's a body behind a cutout of a face, as if one is wearing a mask.

OURSLER: Like a mask. Exactly. In the new exhibition there's the aspect that the intangible self will never be understood by a machine. Let's put it that way.

SCHER: In terms of imagery though, when you show an un-gendered and un-racialized mouth and eyeball, I don't think, "missing body." In this case, with the shapes, for me, it references a body that needs to be shielded—maybe for privacy, or maybe for some other reason.

OURSLER: I think of these things as a membrane, mediating between the world and the core of the self. The mask works two ways: it will give us a chance to hide certain things, but also reveal other things. There's a give and take, a reading back and forth, in the form of language and image. There's a variety of performers I use who will give bits of information, and then the texts that are being spoken by the characters relay a lot of the same subject matter we're discussing.

SCHER: In this new portraiture, if this is how you're characterizing it, could you describe a little bit where your position is relative to not just privacy, but secrecy?

OURSLER: When I meet people, I'm always fascinated by what I can understand immediately, what unfolds over time, and how people let information out or hide things. It's part of a deep connection between people, how you control your information. When the fabric of that is so disturbed, as it's beginning to be now and will be in the near future, I think it'll change the way that that happens on a daily basis.

SCHER: What kind of control freak are you?

OURSLER: People are like, "You should have no problem with an authoritative, overlord in the state structure if you have nothing to hide. If you're not a criminal, you're not a deviant in some way, then you have nothing to hide." Fortunately I don't really have much to hide, I don't think. Maybe there are a few things...

SCHER: I think that's the third time you've said that, though.

OURSLER: [*laughs*] I would break rapidly under interrogation.

SCHER: A machine would recognize that as some kind of stressor. No right, no wrong, no good, no evil, as they say, "only self interest."

OURSLER: Only self interest. My irises are expanding and contracting right now. Seriously, Julia, I

believe that there should be a firewall around everybody and I would strive to create that and fight for it. I would predict that there'll be people who will sell ways of blacking out any kind of massive [collection of information] done. That's definitely part of the show.

SCHER: One thing that I think would be really important is the idea of how intimate you are as an artist. I think you really approach things in an intimate way.

OURSLER: I'm working with performers really intimately in these pieces. To put the humanity back into this, and to get a kind of interface happening between the two...I think that's a really good point. These works are written in various ways that it's meant to trigger various responses with the audience. They're quite intimate because they're whispering and the perspective is almost as though somebody is right next to you, or almost kissing you, or just next to you on the subway breathing on your neck.

The intimate side of it, I think, comes from something you can expand upon with technology. I think of it as locking in the poetry that happens in a very special moment when I work with people in the studio, which unfolds in these pieces. It really can only happen with video or computers, because one can only sustain that for a short amount of time. The fact that it can be captured and re-locked in to these paintings or panels or whatever you want to call them is a big part of what I try to do. It has to do with a close up perspective, which is intimate. You put your finger right on it. I'm so happy you said that, otherwise we probably sound like techno freaks. And that's only part of the work. It's about challenging our concept of humanity.

SCHER: I'm sure other people are talking about the relationship between traditional wall painting and these things on the wall, but you theorized decades a lot of your new interests earlier and have come to a new place with your work. I think we're all going to follow your hunt through new technology to see what's next.

OURSLER: Well, let me interview you about your new work.

SCHER: I'll have to come to New York again one day. And, happy birthday! I know yours is coming up.

OURSLER: What a memory, what a memory...

"TONY OURSLER" IS ON VIEW AT LEHMANN MAUPIN IN NEW YORK THROUGH JUNE 14.