

Interview with Tony Oursler by Petra Heck for the Oude Kerk ---- -----2015 -----

-----Visual introduction-----

PH: To start from scratch, as an interested fan of your work who is unable to visit the church in Amsterdam, could you describe your new installation of video performances that you made especially for the church? What do we see and hear?

TO: The installation for the church consists of characters which are captured in a performative mode, by the technology of the camera. The way I think about it, is kind of doling the poetry, the energy, into the moment, and freezing, crystalizing it, and transplanting it into the architecture, so everything produced with the architecture in mind but it has a distinctly theatrical nature to it. Somehow in this piece, I'm not sure why, maybe because of the theatrical aspect of the Old Church. You are keenly aware of what position you are in, that of observer or performer.

To describe what we see and hear, let me discuss the layout which was evolved over time, between visits and thinking about the space for a year. I really wanted to reduce my interaction with the space to a very ephemeral engagement. In other words, no objects would be placed in the main space, only projections. Of course the surfaces tell an incredible story inside the church which I wanted to connect with in various ways.

You have the spectacular stained glass in one area, which will be our starting point. The glass here was removed during the war, buried and then reassembled. The section I projected on was reassembled in a kind of haphazard way, somehow the plot was lost. Here is a series of duets, the double binary is important in this cosmology, as we will get into later, the notion of digitality is at the core of the work, and I wanted to transpose that onto the performers. Sometimes working in unison, as with the piece called Josie and Holly as a kind of chorus. Other times working in dialogue, as a kind of tips and balances of power with Jim and Kate. Also edited in this section and throughout other parts of the space, are iconic animated dimensional computer models, of generic objects, molecules, apples, tools, etc – which are inter-edited.

Continuing our tour, one area which I knew I always wanted to use, is the ceiling of the Old Church, which has a very delicate wooden structure with sun ornaments, and we project onto one area on the far side of the church, on the ceiling very close to a sun element with a series of characters as well as 3d models, high high above the viewer. This is *Constance, Jim, Joe, and Phyllis*. Each of these characters has a different perspective in relation to the content as well as the viewer - for example Phyllis speaks in Mandarin, and discusses her omnipotence via surveillance referring to China's Internet policies. And these performers are intercut with 3d objects and sound effects.

One of the things that was important to me here was that the images function as a kind of reanimation of the surface of the church. Of course it's widely known the frescos were removed during the reformation, and if you look closely you see traces of these paintings embedded in the wood grain. So there is an element of play, literally re-imagining the surface in a contemporary setting, I thought of it as essentially 'hacking' the church, which is a playful nod to the history of hacking and artificial intelligence.

Further along, towards the asp, there is a rose window towards the left. I positioned another duet between *Jason and a ghost*, performed by Jim Fletcher again [all the works are named after the performers included, ed.]. Here the characters rotate positions during the editing, sometimes sideways, sometimes upside down, Jason looks very bat-like at certain points, as though he was hanging from the rafters of the church.

Then below that, in the center -the choir- of the church, is the carved wooden miserichords. I wanted to shift scale here and interact with the small details of the church. The small carved wooden benches, that are for the church performers to rest on, contain allegories associated with each carving. I quite like the surreality of these carvings. Some look like they could've been made yesterday, and others have a very Hieronymus Bosch feeling to them [c.1450–1516, Late Medieval Netherlandish painter known for its use of fantastic imagery ed.]. I chose to interact with these in the form of two singular performances again called after the performers: *Brandon* and *Sarah*. *Brandon* interacts with the carving of an "older woman removing the intestines of a younger woman" so Brandon is projected approximately 8 inches tall [ca. 20 cm, ed] onto the wood, just to the left of the carving, and he gestures and interacts with the carving.

Just to the left of *Brandon* there is another bench, and somehow represents different psychological states. It displays two different faces blended together in such a way that there are three eyes and an extruded mouth, as though they have been morphed and frozen into wood. Somehow this seemed to represent to me different emotional states, or the quixotic nature of emotions. Playing across the surface of this blurred visage, is *Sarah*. The two carvings, *Sarah* and *Brandon*, play off each other. *Brandon* I thought of as possessed by a machine logic, and *Sarah* as a counterpoint to that, as a celebration of human nature.

Just near that, at the back end of the church is the installation with a talking light, which hangs to the right of the miserichord, and depending on the time of day, illuminates the area in sync to the sound of my voice. This disembodied synthetic character of the voice is a contemplation on how the machine can never really understand its maker.

Following back along towards the entrance, there is one final projection, which is a pairing or doppelganger of the ceiling projection, featuring parallel performances by the same group; *Constance, Jim, Joe, and Phyllis*. This is projected into a corner, forcing a kind of optical distortion of the images, which changes as the view moves in space. And finally we recorded a musical score on the organ of the Old Church, which plays back as a soundtrack in the space. For this I worked with composer Jon Campolo, where we converted the optical figures Turing studied into music, and was played by Jacob Lekkerkerker in the space.

-----Content-----

Could you explain more about the inspirational sources and ideas for this exhibition?

We are in a moment of cultural transition, based on recent digital technology. The title of the exhibition, *I/O Underflow*, refers to the engineering term, input/output, which becomes a sort of allegory for the moment. The flow of information, how it may be

digested or not, and what it is used for. The engineering term refers to the problems of the subtleties of information grouped into big data. In other words the subtle anomalies and texture of information become lost in the underflow, which I take as the starting point of the piece. Which reflects that in its nature, the digital process is a rounding out of information. And so the question is, what is lost in the transition from analog to digital. That is the foundation of the piece and of course I don't have the answer to that but I'm contributing to the discourse.

Alan Turing's (1912-1954) life plays an important role in the exhibition. Turing was a British mathematician, cryptanalyst, philosopher, pioneering computer scientist, marathon runner amongst other things. Turing is also considered to be the father of theoretical computer science and artificial intelligence. The binary coding that the systems nowadays are based on are coming from Turing. You say in one interview that 'everything is turning into big binary codes', can you elaborate on this idea and the relationship to Turing?

Turing is very important to the piece, I quote some of his theoretical writing, and he is personified by various characters, male and female, throughout. After studying his life, I began to think that he could be seen in total as almost a metaphor for his creation. He becomes a kind of post gender post human individual, and had such a creative mind which becomes sacrificed to a world which was then unable to keep up with his evolution.

There are also some turning points, which are important to Turing and the Old Church and society through secular materialism. In a way it falls to Alan, who falls in love with one of his class mates, who almost dies and by this is shocking Alan to the core. This relates to memory and existence, and to the continuing presence of his friend. One can only imagine that this dramatic experience caused him to believe that consciousness could be transported to a mechanical system, much as his friend seemed to be transported from life only to exist as a memory. Turing was prosecuted in 1952 for homosexual acts, and then chemically castrated causing him to grow breasts and becoming depressed. He eventually commits suicide in a very specific way. It was known that Turing was quite fond of the movie *Snow White*, which we reenact in the stained glass projection. The scene where the witch gives the princess the poison apple to eat. Alan put cyanide on the apple and ate it, which has become a defacto symbol of the Apple computer.

Google used a game that people all over the world could play to help computers evolve in accurately tagging images. It didn't work, because people suddenly gave sexual descriptions for everything and the whole system of 'bots' collapsed. At the same time governments, companies and people are using bots and automatically generated information is sent all over the world. We have arrived in a sort of bot society where it becomes unclear what a human and what a bot is, what do you think about this?

Google and their search engines and bots are always going to be at odds with human nature. It doesn't surprise me that algorithmic sections couldn't handle being sexualized. There is always going to be a kind of oil and water relationship between machines and people. Of course they can help exaggerate various aspects of human nature and desire. Eventually people are going to have to fight back against the machines. I'm not saying this lightly, I look back at the amount of time kids spend with video games, and how addicted I am to my phone, and how much time everyone spends interacting with computer technology. We are being taken over by machines, it

just doesn't look like the science fiction movies of the past.

And what about your inspirational source Masahiro Mori (born 1927)? A roboticist who published the article 'The Uncanny Valley' in 1970 on the hypothesis that as robots become more humanlike, they appear more familiar until a point is reached at which subtle imperfections of appearance make them look eerie.

This goes back to your earlier interest in the Google bots of course, it has its roots in the universal Turing machine and other computer intelligence experiments by mathematician John von Neumann, and the continually disturbing question of whether machines will share consciousness. [In 1935 Turing conceived the principle of the modern computer. Turing's stored-program concept, implies the possibility of the machine operating on and modifying its own program, meaning computer intelligence, www.alanturing.net, ed.]

Mori enters the picture in the late 60's when we still had a notion of a physical representation of a machine. A quite antiquated view based on automatons and robots in terms of science fiction. Mori's fantastic graphic kind of ideas evolve that vision to reflect a mirroring of the human form, but also misses the point. My contention is that the new uncanny moment is upon us in terms of a disembodied consciousness which is growing everyday in the form of the internet. Many of the citizens of the world contribute to this every day, and collectively it becomes a very uncanny representation of every facet of human nature, as though we are turning ourselves inside.

-----Context of the church-----

The piece is installed in the context of a church, video performances are visible on the walls, and ceiling. In what way does the piece relate to the location and it's history? For centuries people used this church before your protagonists started talking and singing. You have been connected to the church as a child. In an interview you say you are thankful for this, because it has given you 'a mystical side to counteract the techno-materialism of our age'. Could you explain what you mean(t) by saying this and does it apply to this exhibition?

One of the things that attracted me about the church in relation to the theme of computer science is the ongoing dilemma and give and take between religion and empiricism which has been kind of hobby of mine. I'm interested in when people have a leap of faith, which could be colored either in terms of a rational discovery or another sort of revelation, which can't be explained and how the two seem to be part of the ongoing cultural and scientific notion of progress. The failures are often as interesting as the successes, although they get stripped from most histories and many of the seemingly absurd beliefs persists. This has always been fascinating to me.

In Alan Turing, as I mentioned before, we find a mini narrative which reflects the meta narrative of the modern era. We find that Alan is confronted with the death of his good friend Christopher and the loss of this love provokes a kind of crisis for him, at least the way I see it. There is some evidence of this since he begins to think of how the mind may be separated from the body and simultaneously he becomes less and less

religious, and more and more committed to the notion that the mind can be replicated within a machine.

My own personal relationship with the mystical is ongoing, I feel like at some point I replaced religion with art. As you mentioned I found a lot of analogies between art making and the magical thinking of the church. If you talk about the architecture of the church and the positioning of the human form within it, there are also analogies to the contemplative space of the art gallery or a museum. There is a big connection in terms of creating a space for another kind of thought, which is outside the realm of daily activity. Unfortunately, non-objectively, part of hacking the church could also extend to hacking the art world, it has to do with respecting the position of the viewer, and considering a kind of open relationship. There the church seems to have a conflicted attitude towards the visitor, one may feel small within the space, but the overall effect could be seen as expansive and transcendent.

Traditionally the male voice has dominated the pulpit and the socio-political aspects of that have been destructive to say the least. On the other hand, its been punctuated by all sorts of gender confusion. The pre adolescent choir boy has an incredible beautiful sound, as does the resonance of the organ, the drones of the organ. One could even say the church was designed as a musical chamber, which I was excited to play with, and swap out some of the power structures and the perspective of language in that space.

A lot of heads are projected very high up the wall or on the ceiling even. Are you referring here to a control of minds since a lot of your work deals with the eye, control and a relation to big brother. Or is it much more occult? I also read a text where the author Demetrio Paparoni mentioned both spiritualism and science fiction as points of reference for your work. You write about 'The big black void above us' and that 'sci-fi does reveal something about people's belief systems and fantasy lives now. To a great extent it has replaced religious mythologies in our culture.' Is this also something that relates to this installation in the church?

Of course these 3d computer constructed images as well as the visages and figures projected into the architecture of the church, are replacements of iconography, or should I say displacements of iconography from the past, whereas the hierarchical system of angels, saints, sinners, and devils of the past are replaced by a new collection of contemporary characters. Which of course the slate was cleaned by the reformation.

In older works you often question how systems of mechanical reproduction, like 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. Is this also relevant to the new installation?

Well, for example, the final piece I haven't spoken about yet is the projection on the outside of the Old Church, which consists of a series of statements mixed with 3d objects, rotating in space, repurposing the facade of the church in the red light district. Which is a highly activated juxtaposition, to say the least, a church in a red light district. Here I'm asking for you to think of your relation to that of the image, in terms of identity in relation to the image, so I wrote a series of lines relating to the themes of surveillance, privacy, identification, and identity. The notion that we are recorded and processed, indexed and collated and what this might mean for identity is a question here, and that is somehow at the heart of contemporary portraiture if you

will.

-----Multidisciplinary practice-----

Who are the performers in the piece? I know that Constance DeJong is performing in it. She's a New York writer and artist well known for spoken word performances of her narratives. You have collaborated with her on some major projects in the past, produced hybrid works with her in for instance 1988 – 'Relatives', a sixty minute performance incorporating live performers and television monitors - and together with her and composer Stephen Vitiello produced Fantastic Prayers (1995-1998) for the Dia Art Centre in New York (the first commission for their internet based works platform) amongst other things. Are all the performers collaborators or friends and how does this process work?

I've had the good fortune to work with many great performers - it became evident early on that I couldn't be in all of my own pieces, and that things became much more exciting to hear how other people delivered the text, bringing special energy to the piece and the artwork. As you mentioned I've worked deeply with numerous people, Tracy Leipold, Constance DeJong - numerous collaborations as you mentioned and more to come. Joe Gibbons, Tony Conrad, Brandon Olson, as well, collaborators and performers. I think an artist is made up in great part by his influences, and of course my friends and colleagues have a great effect on me, Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, Laurie Anderson, John Baldessari. I often think that I've got a constellation of characters in the back of my mind when I'm working in the studio that kind of help me work.

Recently I've been interested in finding out actors such as Kate Valk and Jim Fletcher, who have years and years of experience and can reach a magic moment quite rapidly, although in the past I've shunned away from traditional actors, looking for more personal perspectives. Although Jim and Kate are off the charts in terms of their ability to reach different states, sometimes I'm lucky enough to find a group of associates, for example my friend Josie Keefe helped me do some eye casting as well finding performers, which opened up onto a whole group of young creative people who you wouldn't say were actors, but they could be musically inclined, for instance Sarah Kinlaw, Holly Stanton, and Jason Scott - all artists/performers, like Phyllis Ma. That is one of the great things about New York, there is always a concentration of creatives.

Constance and I have had a great creative relationship over many years, I've learned an enormous amount from her approach to language and ideas. The notion of collaboration is tiered - of course hiring someone to act is in its nature a collaboration - but its different from writing a script or coming up with an idea with someone. All these wonderful performers help me do what I think is my main objective with the video, which is to capture a unique moment where the script, the voice, and the image come together.

But next to the collaborations with Constance DeJong and others there was the band called 'The Poetics' that Mike Kelley and you started when you were at the art academy Cal Arts. It was a project that began as a rock band with you singing and playing the organ and Mike Kelley on drums. You also produced radio, performance, dance, and sound pieces. And you are still working in lots of different disciplines like making a video-clip for David Bowie. Can you tell me more about this multidisciplinary practice?

I think what you are getting at is the kind of synesthetic aspect of my work, as I do

have music going through my head a lot, and I think of the performance as syncopate in one way or another. Often thinking of them, as in the old church, as a Cageian [John Cage, ed], recombinant, ever changing composition. Extending language into a sonic or musical space has always been attractive to me, with my own work or in collaboration with others, like Mike and The Poetics, which in turn opened into a whole series of interviews on the connection between sound and art called synesthesia, with many of my musical heroes, such as Alan Vega, Glen Branca, Kim Gordon, Thurston Moore, David Byrne and so on. I've been quite lucky to have collaborated with people in various ways, some of the best musical people around, Lee Ranaldo, Beck, Kim and Thurston, Stephen Vitiello, Tony Conrad, Glenn Branca, Ikue Mori, Neal Leonard, Zeena Parkins, Jim Thurwell, JG Thirwell, and of course David Bowie.

-----Pop culture-----

Your engagement with popular culture is a recurring element within your practice and that I see reflected in the new video performances as well.

Yes, I consider myself a pop artist, and I like to keep things in the popular idiom if I can. I always fantasize about my art being interesting and accessible to people that don't know anything about art history. But that said, I tend to be an inclusive artist, or at least I like to think of myself that way, so referencing can be far and wide, I'm always picking things up from the internet, various linguistic sources such as dictionaries of slang, the way people take language and make it their own, so for this work I looked a lot into hacking and computer linguistics, very rich territory. Of course there is the "Snow White" movie and "Disney." I like to keep abreast of popular trends, I feel like its part of my job description.

-----Medium-----

You are using the format of video projection here for the new installation, could you go into your changing use of video over the years?

Reaching back in time, I can just give you a synopsis of my relation to video, of course I started out as a painter, and it wasn't until I was introduced to the video camera in 1975 or '76 that I began to fuse my interest in painting and composition with poetry, sound, and moving image. In retrospect it makes sense that me being part of a "television generation" would make this connection, so I kind of lived in a world that went between virtual and real space, producing painted images for the camera, and vice versa. Which resulted in numerous video tapes and installations throughout the 80s, many of which were shown in Holland, L7L5 at the Stedelijk Museum in 1984, and numerous video screenings and installations where done with the world wide video festival, which was an important part of the international scene - and looking back important to the development of multi-media as an art form in vernal.

In the early 90s small video projectors came on the market, and allowed me to continue my exploration of the moving image and its relationship to materiality. The experiments with dolls, which are represented in the Old Church with *We Have No Free Will*, and also *X doll*, were early works. There were a lot of experiments with these dolls, effigies and dummies, which have to do with psychological and emotional states, and are a kind of psychological test with the audience. And experiments with scale shifts, as well as explorations of issues of identity. Generally I work in waves of research and ideas. I become fascinated with certain themes, much as how I approached Old Church and the art comes out of this research.

This is also seen in the work in Old Church, for example *Orbital Fix*, which can be seen as a personification of the science of astronomy. There you have Constance DeJong as a sort of planet. I'm very happy with the way the planet looks juxtaposed with the architecture and decor of the rooms, it emphasizes the science fiction nature of the work. In those works there is a lot of computer special effects involved, where as the earlier works were a little simpler. Then we get to the *scratch cards*, which are from a series loosely titled *high* which involve compulsive activities such as smoking, drinking, gambling, etc. They have a very pop visual culture, stemming from Claes Oldenburg and the pop artists in scale and color. Here this is especially installed to relate to the floor tiles, and we see various hands scratching away in the futile hopes of becoming instantly wealthy.

I haven't mentioned the other experiments with video projection that relate to the Old Church, such as the external projection, this was really the third phase of my video experimentation - how the video can work in a public space, which is endlessly fascinating to me. For example on the facade of the church, I thought quite a bit about how to reach the public in a few quick moments, people are passing through in the interior of the red light district, or going to or through a coffee shop, or just walking around as a tourist, or a local inhabitant who might chance upon the work. So there I distilled some of the ideas from the inside of the church. This was the last thing that I wrote, so I thought of it as an invitation card for people to come into the church, and for some I knew this was my only chance to reach them. What is so fantastic about the church as a 'screen' is that there is iconic liminal space, which rises up above the city, but is probably usually ignored. And also there is a tradition with the stained glass windows - a familiar public imagining system from the past.

In all of your works in the church and most of the work you have done, and you are famous and acclaimed for, is that 'video no longer acts as a window to look through but is somehow made physical' where 'language and image' become one, to use your own words. Can you explain the aspects of the interior and exterior and the virtual and physical in relation to the format you are using? And can you go into your unique approach of humanising objects with your projections like this church, but also tree projections, the dummies and dolls and other daily objects, making them all appear 3D and sculptural by nature?

I love that question, it's really at the center of what I do, and image construction is something that artists think about everyday. It's funny to analyze, although perhaps a painter contracts a frozen image - but it's always said about art and what makes it so interesting, is that it looks different all the time - when you start to analyze what's happening, the image is fixed, but the viewer is malleable. We change all the time, for various reasons. Then of course when you think about the differences between people, it starts to become widely complex and philosophical, what it means to communicate at all. So, when working with the moving image, it adds even more plasticity to the equation. And the imposition of image within either context or materiality, adds something else. In other words - a wall is a wall until you project onto it, then it becomes something else, in combination with the wall, that is inherently a kind of hybrid.

Of course people tried this in painting and photography - Picabia's beautifully layered paintings for example [Francis Picabia 1879-1953 was a French avant-garde painter, ed.]. But there is a kind of displacement which happens and that I'm endlessly intrigued by, for example when a face is projected onto a bouquet of flowers, or a face

onto a building, or a visage onto a floating cloud of smoke. All these fusions for lack of a better word, take on a third meaning that is hopefully more than the sum of its parts. One can look at the history of optics and the example of the apple - the way we see an apple as red has to do with the fact that the apple absorbs all the other colors of the spectrum except red, which it reflects. This is what we have been designed to see, and the manner in which we are accustomed to see the world.

The dynamic monkey wrench for me has been, if you project onto the apple, you interrupt that natural process and create a new paradigm for image construction. Somehow I stumbled into this, which somehow keeps me working, until I get replaced by a hologram at least.

-----language-----

Language is a very important aspect in your practice, you write all of the scripts yourself. How do you use language in the new piece and also in relationship to the other, older works in the church? I read somewhere that you said: "My own use of narrative was always intended to trap the viewer: a structure to build upon, play with. As with my use of 'actors', my narratives are constantly falling apart. The more I study narrative structure, the more I become convinced that there is no such thing. What we know as narrative is really a mental or physical predisposition in the reader/viewer rather than a structure." You also mentioned to love the author William Burroughs' metaphor "language is a virus". Is this something that you like to refer to still?

I like to talk about language, I just compiled a book, *Vox Vernacular*, with excerpts of 30 years of writing, which is available from Yale University. Which made me consider why I write and what it means to the audience/viewer. I found it a very interesting phenomenon, when I was talking to people about compiling my writing into the book, people would give me a blank stare, they didn't think of me as a writer. I think people probably believe a lot of my writing is stream of consciousness. It has an illusory connection to the image. It is written in such a way that it is meant to activate the viewer in different ways, at least that is my fantasy - I'm never sure if this succeeds or not.

I've also read a lot about neurological experiments recently, as there have been so many examples and found that people can not actually see an image and read at the same time. I really thought that when people look at my work there is a kind of hemispheric switching going on, although I can't verify this either. Recently I have a much more mysterious approach to language, I think when I made some of those statements I was really playing with narrative and physiological tests, so the connection was more clear. Recently, I think of the work as more of poetry, performers and music. My performers have told me that they even go into trance states.

But as you may imagine, I'll eventually return to a more linear narrative. Right now I'm working on a film and I'm trying to at least have a through line of a comprehensible narrative, but it remains to be seen whether I'll continue to be interested in that. One of my favorite books is *The Storytelling Animal* by Jonathan Gottschall and it has a fascinating perspective on narrative as part of human evolution. One of my favorite things that he points out - is that if we really analyze the amount of time spent in narrative or pseudo narrative pursuits such as daydreams, conversations, internet surfing, game playing, television, movies, radio, and dream states - our human time commitment to narrative far exceeds any other

activity. I thought this was so interesting and positive since being an artist and the creative process is always depicted as being on the outside of society, yet from a statistical point of view it is really at the core of human existence. So don't chop off your ear Mr Van Gogh - you're the life of the party!

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