

Tony Oursler: L7-L5, 1984

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The following essay was written in 1984 in reaction to Tony Ourslers installation of L7-L5 at The Kitchen in New York City in March of that year.

Seeing this installation set off a chain reaction, a host of divergent considerations. It might be called seeing at first sight, this unexpected cropping-up which in all its diversity seemed to spring into being all at once. If there is anything to designate in the first place, its the place where seeing begins.... in the dark.

According to the artist, theres a reference being made here to domestic darkness, to houses and rooms where the night is lit by television. In the installation room.... maybe it is night. All is definitely dark and the only light is the kind only a television emits. Yet gone are the TV sets, the monitors. Television is all around and nowhere to be seen; not directly, not on the familiar rectangle, not as anything except reflected light, images let loose.

Theyre released onto tinfoil, tinted water, pieces of broken glass. Its on these unvalued, everyday materials that Ourslers video images play; materials turned respectively into a colony of stars, a miniature lake, a glass house each of which is a local viewing site illuminating an otherwise darkened scene:

Over a cityscape of cardboard buildings dangles the colony of stars glinting with colored light. An undisclosed television receiver is the sender of light, projecting on-air broadcast images. Parts of these projections bounce back as colored glints. And as the eye can focus only on one thing at a time, these fragments ricocheting off tin foil can be either the shape or a star of the twinkling of an image. As for television-the-sender.... its an emissary thats got its eye on colonizing the skies, an agent that would be king. It would be hard to imagine any child any longer looking up to the night and questioning, twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are. In a second scene, there are children left to imagine what they will. Encased in cardboard, in an eccentric video game/peep show, sits the miniature lake reflecting images of a boy and girl at play. Their toys are from the realm of science fiction, and very noisy toys are these. Theyre part of a picture, which is not asserting an entirely lighthearted world. The world of childs play is linked to an adult counterpart, to an industry which is making a lot of noise about science fiction in films and TV programs and candy and

comic books and a succession of goods invented by a now outsized enterprise. By contrast, evidence of inventing science fiction as a subject of any import or significance is dwarfed and marginalized and would fill a space about as diminutive as the miniature lake. On its surface its the moment when questions are set in motion. Will the children with their playings engage in the invention of themselves and their world, take some role in that process? Or will the goods of a science fiction enterprise supply the oppression, the domination of imagination? At a third site in the installation, there is evidence of the flip side of science fiction, which is no fiction at all to those who in real life have had encounters of an extraordinary kind.

Atop a black paper boulder rests a house of broken glass receiving a taped visitor who got there somewhat by chance. She is the sole respondent to a request for accounts of first-person experiences with aliens, a request the artist ran in a local New York newspaper. Though only one respondent came running, this woman has accounts enough for what seems to last forever. For an installation seems an uncommon context in which to be faced with videotape that requires sequential attention; a tape of consecutive images with sound-synch spoken text. Undifferentiated, continual time is not of the essence here, is not a principle by which videotape is made to reinforce its static context, made to mix consistently with a plastic medium. To set aside this historical issue is one of the strengths of the work: the relationship between tape and object is allowed to shift basis. Hence, the broken glass house is a structure related to the subject of the tape. The womans accounts and drawings are of her home invaded by aliens, her life shattered ever after into pieces that wont fit comfortably together again. But something is befitting here. The relationship between mediums is shifted onto a site where tape and object become a collapsed, an integrated image. Its an image partly made by video, partly made by hand, and the parts reinforce each other on the basis of content. Its a strength of the artists throughout this installation to mix mediums uncommonly and to be a highly original kind of matchmaker. For example, its through the unlikely union of electronically produced images and those unvalued, everyday materials that Oursler released video images from a viewing instrument and has them arriving as integral elements of his original constructs. The dislocation of video images has a number of implications.... and L7-L5 has one exception, one work where tape plays on a monitor.

Its set into a paper-made American flag stood on end with its broken pole sticking up in the air. In place of the flags field of stars theres the monitor with the videotape starring Ourslers idea of characters little clay figures pixelated into action. They always can be seen as yet

another instance of technology wed to a homely material: clay electronically induced to life. And as always, theres something uncanny about Ourslers idea of artmaking, his made by hand/by video process. Its simplicity pokes a hole in the over- inflated emphasis commonly placed on special effects, industry-derived values, countless state-of-the-art tools and techniques. Its not from buying this line of goods that Oursler achieves the complexity evident in every one of the installations scenes.

And in the end, the dislocation of video images from the tyranny of technology begins to seem like a subtext. Its an idea that crops up upon seeing the integration of unlike mediums, upon discovering the subject of these relocations achieved by a vision of art.

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