

ART IN REVIEW; TONY OURSLER

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'The Influence Machine'

Art in the Park

Madison Avenue at 26th Street

It's all or nothing with Tony Oursler's installation at Madison Square Park. Mr. Oursler's "Influence Machine" -- four large-scale video projections and a sound piece involving a street lamp -- must be seen as part of a larger whole, a Fellini-esque installation-cum-happening that also includes the rubble of the partly renovated park, the golden-crowned skyscrapers nearby, the dark silhouettes of the people tending the work's array of technical equipment and the milling passers-by and dog-walkers who chat with one another or on cell phones while watching the various effects metamorphose before their eyes.

This slightly carnival-like, mildly sinister mix is intentional: "The Influence Machine" was scheduled to coincide with the renovation. It proves once more that Mr. Oursler's work benefits by bringing its slick, somewhat magical images into contact with the rougher edges of the real world. The first of a series of three outdoor exhibitions sponsored by Target Stores and presented by the Public Art Fund, this work is also perfect for the Halloween season.

Installed in the north end of the park, "The Influence Machine" presents a phantasmagoric progression of ghostly images, disembodied voices, drifting letters, eerie music (by Tony Conrad) and various loud booms and bangs from

sunset to 9 p.m. The subject, appropriately enough, seems to be two equally immaterial spheres -- the spirit world and the Internet -- plus the notion that one can get trapped in either.

On the Fifth Avenue side of the park, the first installation you encounter is the street lamp, its light flickering in unison with an electronic voice reading messages that Mr. Oursler has culled from the Internet. Across the park, on the Madison Avenue side, is the last element, a series of static-filled recordings, supposedly of spirit voices, which connoisseurs of such things make available on the Web. These accompany a video of a huge, pounding fist, projected on the thick corner column of the stalwart Metropolitan Life Building. At first you may think it is a judge calling the unruly park to order, but eventually it may suggest an attempt to communicate with another realm.

The most engaging parts of "The Influence Machine" lie between these two components. A series of unrelated statements and questions scroll across some hurricane fencing in letters five feet high, garbling and ungarbling as they go. Nearby a video of a man knocking his head against a hard surface is projected on a tree trunk.

Five of Mr. Oursler's signature talking heads appear at billboard scale. Three faces are projected in sequence on a tree, where the leaves make them look a little like werewolves or something out of Arcimboldo. Most striking are a man's face and then a woman's, projected on clouds of machine-generated steam, fading into and emerging from the billowing white, moving up and back in space, while the projector's beam jumps in synchronization with their moving lips.

These heads appear to be channeling spirits, talking to the dead or ranting at the living or at the Internet. But as with much of Mr. Oursler's work, the message, while thematically pertinent, is less interesting than the medium, and the medium is at its best under makeshift, improvisatory conditions like these.