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Tony Oursler, *Kepone Drum* (1990)

## Mind over matter

Tony Oursler and Ericka Beckman master the politics of art

by David Joselit

Imagine the president of the United States and members of Congress — Democrats and Republicans, senators and representatives — dominating media time for weeks debating the philosophical power of an image. Is it conceivable that elections might be lost or won on the basis of a candidate's stance? On "To desecrate or not to desecrate" or "Burn, baby, burn?"

As Jasper Johns demonstrated years ago to a bemused art world, the flag is "just an image." And as virtually any college survey in 20th-century art will inform you, Johns painted the flag because of its anonymity, its emptiness, its status as just another image.

Or did he? Perhaps Johns was more prescient in his choice of an icon than is often admitted. Perhaps he saw the flag not as a banal symbol raised over post offices and hoisted at Fourth of July picnics but as still touching a sensitive American nerve. Or maybe Johns saw the flag as more literally analogous to his paintings: a thick but uneven surface, lined and unstable, revealing nothing of what lies beyond its smooth face.

What are conservative politicians afraid of? Why are they picking on flag burners? Perhaps they want to divert attention from the monumental S&L scandal. Maybe President Bush is seeking to establish his patriotism beyond a shadow of a doubt before raising taxes.

Or perhaps the controversy surrounding this potent *image* of American unity arises from a more thoroughgoing fear. Does the renewed "sacredness" of the flag assert American solidarity and power in the face of an ever stronger and politically unified Europe? Does it mask fears of a more racially diverse United States plagued with a potentially explosive and apparently permanent underclass?

Each of these motives is plausible, but none explains why such ideological questions have been projected onto an *image* rather than a full-blown political agenda. For the flag-burning controversy must be considered as a truly postmodern drama, bespeaking the recent, and unsettling, displacement of politics and social regulation onto the world of signs and representations. What has been called "censorship" recently in the arts — the efforts to limit the kinds of imagery that the National Endowment for the Arts may fund, and the pornography prosecutions of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and the rap group 2 Live Crew — cannot be disengaged from the new emphasis on the flag. It's all part of the same project of social regulation: to remake our world in a new image.

By now the intersection of "reality" with the illusory riches of the image world is familiar to most Americans. Advertising and television have channeled the desires

and aspirations of individuals into pre-packaged patterns of consumption (with television news and political sound bites shaping politics in a similar way). You could think of "postmodern" as describing a state of affairs where signs and symbols detach themselves from their referents and are traded on the "image market" like junk bonds.

Throughout the 1980s, and now into the '90s, artists have asked themselves how they can enter into such a spectacular image world, where politics can be reduced to issues like the rights of a small number of citizens to burn a piece of fabric covered with stars and stripes. What in 1990 would constitute a truly political art?

Two artists on the faculty of the Massachusetts College of Art — Ericka Beckman, a filmmaker who has also exhibited installations and photographs, and Tony Oursler, who's known for his single-channel videotapes, performance collaborations, and sculptural installations — have attempted a cogent answer to this question. Having trained at the prestigious California Institute of the Arts, both play an important role in Boston's sophisticated media scene, which centers on Mass Art, the Boston Film/Video Foundation, and the Institute of Contemporary Art.

Artists who attempt to "deconstruct" the image world — that is, to lay bare its power in regulating our thoughts and desires — have developed a series of strategies, particularly in film, video, and photography. Some have adopted an almost documentary approach, seeking to reintroduce the "referent," revealing the actual social relationships masked by signs and representations. Others have drawn narrative fragments — like commercials or prime-time soap operas — directly from the media and reorganized them into collages or montages meant to demonstrate the contradictions inherent in the image world: its two-faced status as the peddler of desire and the conduit of social regulation or control.

Beckman and Oursler opt for a more unstable, or hybrid, approach in which fantasy life is constantly slipping in and out of pre-packaged media formulas. They cook up a media-mythic space whose rich texture is composed of live action, special effects, computer graphics, and obviously handmade sculptural sets. Whereas much of documentary or classically deconstructive art has emphasized the *production* of formulaic meanings in advertising, entertainment, and the news by quoting, refuting, or montaging the media, Oursler and Beckman place their emphasis on *consumption*: on the ways pre-packaged myths have entered into our cognitive processes as well as our fantasy

lives.

Like a theater of the mind, their videotapes and films provide an alternatively hilarious and terrifying window onto the process of mental digestion: video games, fairy tales, or sales pitches are swallowed whole and internalized or transformed within the psyche while others float around intact, like indigestible fragments of media roughage. Unlike the ideological image of the flag pandered by conservative politicians — as an image that is universal, sacred, and self-evident — the work of Oursler and Beckman dramatizes the density and discontinuity of the sign, its potential to mean different things to different people.

Tony Oursler's background in painting is apparent in his videotapes, whose distorted, brightly colored sets have a lurid, homemade quality. Like many students of Cal Arts conceptual artist John Baldessari, Oursler considers the media he uses — like video, photography, or painting — no more than an artistic tool for expressing his concepts, which are the real core of his

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work. He is critical of video artists who fetishize technical innovations and new special effects by transforming their work into an artificial trade-show exhibition.

Oursler's work is emphatically low tech. His sculptural props and backgrounds are manipulated by visible means; they relinquish any attempt at verisimilitude, cheerfully revealing the mechanics of their illusionism. These mechanics resemble the primitive theater of puppet shows, or childhood play; they introduce a strong element of myth and fantasy. Yet they're put to work telling entirely grown-up stories about social control and exploitation.

In a recent collaborative videotape with Constance DeJong entitled *Joyride*, Oursler creates a miniaturized toy Disneyland/Epcot Center that transforms corporate production and manipulation into a form of amusement or entertainment (just like the real thing). Throughout the tape, live human bodies are caught in a weblike jettison of mechanical devices, corporate logos, and communications networks. In one particularly humorous but chilling scene, a group of executives sit around a gameboard-like model of the amusement park outlining their market research on what visitors do at the facility: x percent go to the refreshment center, y percent set off seeking souvenirs, and so on. These overgrown adolescents move people around like pieces in a game, or rats in a maze.

Identifying adolescent glee with grim media manipulation is at the heart of

Oursler's work. It shares with science fiction a horror tinged with fascination toward our ever-expanding image technologies. Although he has had great success in Europe, showing videotapes and installations at such prestigious museums as the Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris, and the Museum Folkwang, in Essen, his work — particularly his installations — has been received less enthusiastically in the United States.

All the same, Oursler hopes to use the sale of video sculptures and paintings — often derived from the sets of his tapes — to finance new single-channel videos at a time of dwindling federal and state funds for the arts. His recent show at Diane Brown Gallery in New York was characterized by innovative ways of presenting television as a sculptural form. In almost every case, the video image was mediated, refracted, or reflected through some intervening lens. In one work, entitled *Kepone Drum*, a chemical barrel, turned on its side and stenciled with early-American motifs, emitted a "spill" onto the floor in which a video narrative, alternating between documentary text and fantasy drama, was reflected. This "leak" (in the literal sense of the term as well as its connotation as a media exposé) presented an emotional and factual (fairy)tale of worker exploitation.

In keeping with Oursler's strategy of using childlike naïveté, innocence, or play to mask but also to reveal the nasty underside of the corporate image world, Ericka Beckman's films often echo theories of early-childhood language acquisition, and particularly the drama of play and the dynamics of games. Like Oursler, Beckman was trained at Cal Arts, where she says many artists experimented with film before settling into other media, like painting, photography, and sculpture. Beckman has remained committed to the small but lively world of independent avant-garde film, a world of which Mass Art is an important center. But unlike earlier American avant-garde cinema, which focused on a self-referential collage aesthetic, Beckman's work reaches into the pre-packaged realm of media myths and fantasies.

Her 1986 tour de force film *Cinderella* is a densely textured musical allegory of the production and consumption of signs and meanings. It takes place in an ever-shifting mythical space that alternates between pseudo-traditional settings like a forge and the electronic coordinates of video games. Like Oursler, Beckman weaves several different image realities together in the same representation: live action takes place within an electronic grid, or special effects intrude on a cartoon-like sculptural set. Through this formal discontinuity, Beckman conveys the complexity of our cognitive processes, which work on many levels at once, sometimes synthesizing dissimilar realities.

In the course of the film, Beckman's updated Cinderella is transformed from a woman who *consumes* images of femininity to one who *produces* her own meanings. We meet Cinderella as a drudge fanning the fire in a Dickensian forge. She enters into a picaresque quest to capture a prince, which is staged in the electronic space of a video game.

When, after several failures to win the game, Cinderella finally molds herself into the feminine ideal and wins her prize, she decides to reject her already packaged role as perfect wife (or girlfriend). She finds her own voice, throws off her constricting dress in favor of more-comfortable attire, and, in a rousing production number at the close of the film, asserts her refusal to be transformed into an image. No plot résumé can do justice to the richness of Beckman's film, which embodies the paradox of how the myths and fantasies of femininity attract and also subjugate women.

Few would deny that the work of Ericka Beckman and Tony Oursler is artistically sophisticated and often entertaining to boot. But is it political? I believe it is. The debates surrounding flag burning and the larger issue of censorship have turned the postmodern transformation of the image world into a political battlefield in which opposing forces fight to regulate what kinds of meanings may and may not be produced. Beckman and Oursler reveal how we are positioned as consumers of pre-packaged meanings, but they also show us a different, active form of image consumption. Like Cinderella, they tell us that we can sift through the myths and desires that float through our heads and forge a different kind of reality: one that we produce for ourselves. □