

## Press Release

Tony Oursler, "*Experimentum crucis*"

"Science does not need mysticism and mysticism does not need science but man needs both."  
—Fritjof Capra<sup>1</sup>

In scientific terms, *Experimentum crucis* refers to an experiment designed to produce a decisive result that rules out all other accepted theories and hypotheses, if proven true. Primarily used in physics, it is sometimes referred to as the "ultimate experiment" on a given question. Though it has been a guiding principle in the field since the Enlightenment, the idea of a definitive experiment that can provide certainty has long had its detractors. As the title of this exhibition, I would like to propose that we imagine "*Experimentum crucis*" not as a definite model of any experiment, but as an atmosphere of ideas that evolves constantly.

The exhibition consists of three projects by acclaimed American artist Tony Oursler: multimedia installation *Phase Trans* (2019), *Eclipse* (2019), a series of outdoor projections that merge the natural world with human narrative, and *Imponderable Digital Archive* (2016 - 20) which represents a selection of more than 1,000 images from the artist's archive accompanied by four related lectures by the scholars Stephanie O'Rourke, Branden Joseph, Pascal Rousseau and Noam Elkott.

*Eclipse*, originally commissioned and produced for the garden of the Fondation Cartier, consists of a series of video portraits projected onto the trees and surrounding buildings. Inspired by a variety of origin stories—the transformation of Daphne into a tree, the Tree of Life from Norse cosmogony, DNA technology CRISPR-Cas9, a small metaphorical drawing of a tree by Charles Darwin—that suggest networks of interdependencies between technology and nature. It creates a dynamic sound and light environment where vegetation becomes the center of conflicting world views. For *Phase Trans*, Oursler developed his own "high energy, resonant optical cloud system," turning water vapor into an ethereal, three-dimensional vortex for his projections and their monologues. Through this inventive technological approach, the artist explores the ubiquitous element of water as a repository for belief systems. An extensive text by the artist, "On Water & Magical Thinking," will accompany the work.

The *Imponderable Digital Archive* evolved from the artist's work with the LUMA Foundation as well as MoMA in New York and reflects his research since the mid-1980s, as well as the extensive book which was published by LUMA in 2016. For this exhibition, more than 1,000 images from the archive will be projected and the viewers are invited to watch four scholarly monologues prepared in response to the archive. Stephanie O'Rourke's talk explores the work of Franz Mesmer, its scientific successes and failures as well as some of its cultural implications. Pascal Rousseau discusses thought photography, a little known process that evolved at the turn

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<sup>1</sup> Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1975).

of the last century, equal parts poetic and New Age, and perhaps an inspiration for the movement from figurative painting towards abstraction. Noam Elcott discusses the pre-cinematic, phantasmagorical displays of Gaspar Robertson and others, a topic which is important to Oursler's oeuvre. Finally, Branden W. Joseph contextualizes trends in UFO photography in relation to Cold War technology and media verisimilitude. This lecture is interesting today given the recent releases of the US Pentagon as UFOs have now become UAPs (Unidentified Aerial Phenomena).

Both *Eclipse* and *Phase Trans*, in their own singular way, merge scientific fact with human belief to plot the intertwined narratives of mythology and scientific discovery. Fact, faith, and speculation are considered side by side with equal measure as tools we use to describe the natural world. These works belong to a series of projects by Oursler that explore the human relationship with "magical thinking." Lately there seems to be a growing interest in the convergence between science and spirituality to explain those anomalies where scientific proof is lacking. We may never have definitive answers to understand some aspects of our world, and creative intuition fills the void. As curator of this project, I would liken this human impulse to a locomotive or a perpetual motion device, harnessing intuitive and creative thought processes to question what we truly believe. This exhibition may invite the viewer to question their preconceptions of the world, asking them to compare what they think they see to what they actually see, what they interpret and what they don't interpret. This culturally self-sustaining process raises the question—what is the vital energy source behind consciousness?

"*Experimentum crucis*" combines mysticism, scientific proofs, non-verified hypotheses, and belief through an unveiling of the full creative process and its underlying research. Oursler's work creates an experience that reveals singular realms between consciousness and illusion. Viewing Tony Oursler's works, one comes to an understanding of scientific discovery as a creative evolution of ideas that is in some ways as much of an art as it is a science.

In a beautifully skilled way, Oursler intuitively weaves visual and narrative components, combining scientific facts and history with unusual discoveries and speculative hypotheses. Furthermore, his writings, notes and archives play an important role in his creative process, with extensive research underlying much of his work. He's said, "For every project I do, it's written in such a way that is meant to activate the viewer in different ways – at least it's my fantasy – I am never sure whether this succeeds or not."<sup>2</sup>

A word may enter a language with a single definition, but over time it may evolve and acquire new meanings that are related but nevertheless distinct. Sometimes Oursler uses a methodology in which he plays with accidental similarities of language, information, and images as if these were somehow evidence of deeply rooted connections. Though some are absurd on their face, deep down they feel true. In *Eclipse* and *Phase Trans*, narrative loops in the most peculiar way through enigmatic images, fact, fiction, and time, producing their own sort of temporality.

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<sup>2</sup> Petra Heck, Interview with Tony Oursler from *Tony Oursler I/O Underflow*, (Amsterdam: Stichting de Oude Kerk, 2015).

Since all technology is an aggregation of all past inventions, Oursler's work demands the viewer to exist in multiple times, suggesting that digital space collapses linear histories. The artist plots the intangible boundaries of past and present, sometimes unfolding into the indeterminate areas of the future. Time, reality, science, pseudoscience and fiction converge to produce a unique vision with the power to transform our perceptions of "reality."

This exhibition reveals the function of art as an integration of scientific, cognitive, spiritual, ecological dimensions of life into one unified vision? Perception, imagination and mythology blend with scientific fact and historical blunder to comprise the artist's mode of "magical thinking," becoming an almost palpable alternate reality in the artwork's form. In his work and through his archives, Tony Oursler produces counternarratives that posit their own distinct fields of knowledge. Presented through technologies that are repurposed in their own unique ways, the works open the gates for the viewer to see beyond the spectrum, opening fields in our conscious and unconscious minds for a broader understanding of the world around us.

LARA PAN

*\*Due to Covid-19, we regret that we are unable to show the film Imponderable (2015) in this exhibition as was previously announced. Viewing requires specialty 3-D glasses, and in consideration of proper sanitation and the health and safety of visitors, we have decided that it is best not to display the work at this time.*