



Tony Oursler, *Tear of the Cloud* (2018), multi-channel installation. All Images courtesy the artist.  
Photo credit Nicholas Knight, courtesy Public Art Fund, NY.

## TONY OURSLER *TEAR OF THE CLOUD*

Public Art Fund, October, 2018

The Lenape name for the Hudson River is “Muhheakantuck,” which translates to “river that flows both ways.” The freshwater that flows from upstate mixes with the salty Atlantic as the tides ebb and flow. The cultural and technological histories along this tidal estuary’s banks similarly swirled together in Tony Oursler’s *Tear of the Cloud* (2018), a multi-channel nocturnal public artwork realized by Public Art Fund on and around the ruins of the 69<sup>th</sup> Street Transfer Bridge last October. Named for both Lake Tear of the Clouds, New York state’s highest pond in the Adirondacks (formerly believed to be the source of the Hudson), and remote “cloud” computing, the project was a labyrinthine investigation of Oursler’s extensive research into the history of technology, his hometown of Nyack,

and the surrounding Hudson region. To walk through the work and experience its overlapping sights and sounds was to conjure ghosts from the margins of history and plot the multidirectional flows between them.

*Tear of the Cloud* employed many signature elements of Oursler’s practice, such as the excavation of irrational and spiritualist beliefs underpinning technological history explored in *The Influence Machine* (2000), his major precursor in a public park, and the forced dialogue, over-the-top performers, and “soap opera effect” high-definition video of *Imponderable* (2015-2016), a feature-length theatrical installation. The site-specificity and peripatetic experience in a quiet park on the city’s limits, however, distinguished *Tear of the Clouds* in Oursler’s oeuvre. Projected

onto the transfer bridge and river, the work’s backdrop was Trump Place, a sprawling high-rise condominium development of the 45th President of the United States separated from the park by the elevated West Side Highway, a constant reminder of the social divisions that persist into the present.

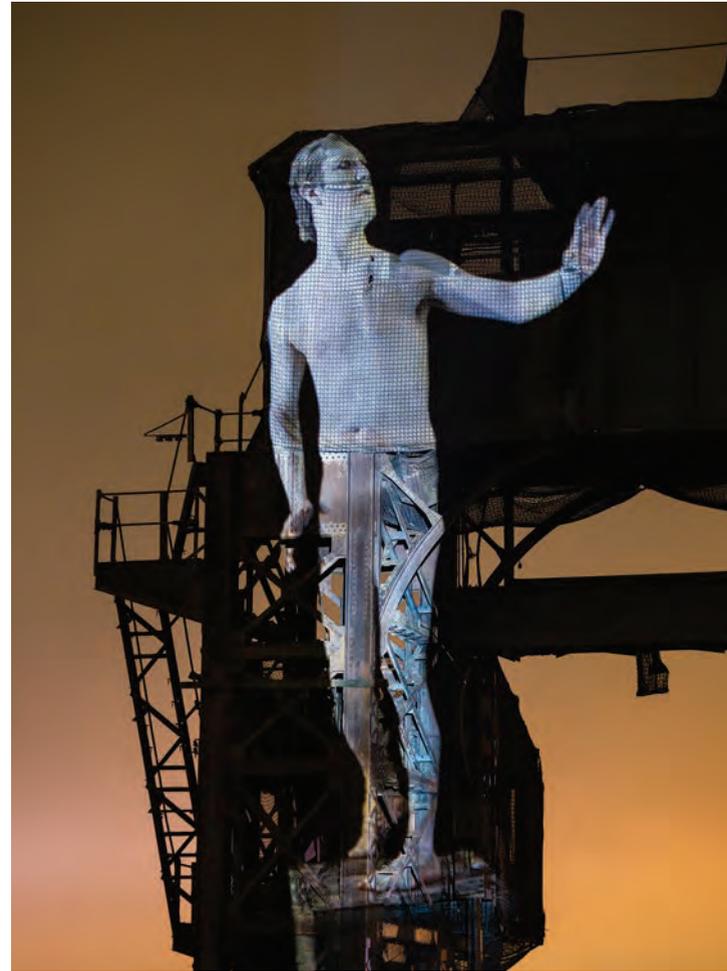
The five digital projections and three audio tracks drew viewers along the walkways of Riverside Park South. Some projections were timed together, but others cycled through asynchronously, making each experience a new combination. The rich lexicon of imagery and historical referents in *Tear of the Cloud* connected along syllogistic and thematic lines, evoking the uncatalogued yet instantly accessible nature of information in the age of the cloud. Non-linear mixing and sampling defined the spatial experience of work itself, underscored by the projection

of Bronx-born hip-hop legend Grandmaster Flash riffing about Nyack-native appropriation and collage artist Joseph Cornell. Intentionally labyrinthine and non-linear didactic materials in the form of a poster and an online glossary mapped the work’s thematic topology and offered viewers access to the work’s obscure historical referents.

The intertwined histories of technology, culture, and ecology explored in the moving images and sounds paralleled the work’s assemblage of the industrial transfer bridge’s rusting metal, the projections’ digital immateriality, and the river’s living ecosystem. A land acknowledgement written in collaboration with the artist collective New Red Order scrolled up the gantry’s half-sunken surfaces, setting the tone for the work’s investigation of regional history through the lens of its horrors and injustices.



Tony Oursler, *Tear of the Cloud* (2018), multi-channel installation.



A willow tree along the banks hosted ghostlike images of facial recognition software, dramatic and musical performers, and a computer animated chess piece, alluding to IBM's Deep Blue. These images dematerialized upon moving down the park's path, and the front of the gantry came more completely into view.

Obscure characters appeared on the monumental rusting forms against a black background, an homage to the early films shot in Thomas Edison's Black Maria Studio in West Orange, New Jersey. Shot on a green screen, the figures floated in a black ether, speeding up, spinning, and darting across the industrial surfaces in vignettes from history's margins. The bearded king of the Millerites, a 19<sup>th</sup> century upstate doomsday cult, made proclamations amidst cryptic numbers; Pauline, Edison's early

cinematic rebel and damsel in distress of the Palisades, swung on a rope; Susan Walker Morse, daughter of the famous inventor and painter, sat for a portrait made concurrently with the invention of the telegraph; and a man performed a "talking drum," a West African coded telecommunication device used by enslaved people in New York long before Morse Code—just to name a few.

Projections onto the waters of the Hudson were viewable only from the pedestrian pier, like a secret reward for traversing the entire cinematic path. In one projection, a woman whose body was found in the Hudson River reached out from the depths, a tragedy that inspired Edgar Allen Poe's story "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842), the first murder mystery based on true crime. Poe's merger of horrors found in fact and fiction had an even more unsettling parallel when the bound bodies of two

Saudi sisters who recently attempted to claim asylum were found in the park during the same weeks as Oursler's show. This tragic collision of current events and historical reference mirrored the project's many narrative and iconographic superimpositions, revealing a history of technology that is not a product of reason and science, but rather a complex tapestry of legend, violence, and specters that continue to haunt the present.

The interlacing of the digital and immaterial, the analog and industrial, and the organic and ecological culminated in Oursler's short animation of a figure who jumps, falls, then gets back up—his metaphor for the act of creating art. Shown as a pixelated, looping GIF, the frames were encoded onto DNA of Hudson River bacteria then extracted back out, a process first tried on a scene from film's photographic history: Muybridge's

famous study of a galloping horse. DNA lasts thousands of years longer than celluloid, video tape, or digital infrastructures, making it a potentially rich archival material, but manipulating it within living organisms opens an ethical Pandora's box. The same CRISPR process used to record this allegory for artistic production would soon lead to the troubling "gene edited babies" headlines, another timely parallel in current events that pointed to the interconnection between bio-logical processes, scientific innovation, and the potential for horror.

ANNIE DELL'ARIA