



**After dissecting pop music John Oswald has turned to turning people into hypnotic moving photos.**

## STUNNING VISUALS AT SONIC ACTS

By Marinus de Ruiter

Known primarily for cutting up famous pop songs to create his own music, John Oswald could well be called 'the grandfather of present-day media assassins,' as he put it himself on the phone from Canada. Together with other pioneers of computer-generated sonic and visual art, Oswald is appearing at the 11th annual Sonic Acts Festival, entitled 'The Anthology of Computer Art'. On Sunday at De Balie, he gives 'A Short Talk on Endlessness' and presents *Chronophototics*, which includes 1,000 photographs he has taken of people over the last three years.

Born in 1953, the Canadian musician, composer and artist first appeared in the public eye when Michael Jackson's lawyers forced Oswald to destroy all the remaining copies of his remarkable album, *Plunderphonic*, which was released in 1989. The reason was the track 'Dab'—a severe rearrangement of Jackson's 'Bad', made by cutting it up into fragments. The album also included reworked songs by The Beatles, Elvis, Prince and Dolly Parton.

Despite the legal threats, Oswald never felt like compromising his way of making music, which he had been practising since the late 1960s. 'I realised that with almost everything I did I wanted to emphasise the original,' says the soft-spoken, eloquent composer. 'What I find really satisfying is when this dislocation of something that you know really well is becoming something new, because of some interesting juxtaposition.'

In addition to pop, *Plunderphonic* included mutations of classical and avant-garde music, as well as dissected TV tunes and African pygmy singing. In a way, the work pre-empted today's DJs

who mash up multitudes of pop hits with new electronic sounds and dance rhythms; but Oswald used far more whimsical structures.

He gained wide recognition in the music industry and was invited to legally plunder tracks by The Doors, Carly Simon, Metallica and most successfully, The Grateful Dead. The culmination was 1993's *Plexure*, a composition comprising tiny fragments from some 1,000 familiar songs.

Later on, Oswald developed a visual counterpart to his sound compositions, the 'chronophotic' image. In 2000, he exhibited his first on a large plasma screen: it showed a series of digital images slowly morphing from one into the next. These were appropriated photographs of famous people, mixed in with images of well-known artworks, paintings, sculptures and other photos. It was an act of sweet revenge when Oswald chose mugs of Michael and Janet Jackson as the basis for his first chronophotic works.

Around the time of these first cross-breeds of photography and video stills, Oswald also started taking pictures himself. 'I was already working with images on computers a lot, so I waited until it was practical to get a digital camera,' he says. 'Like most people taking up a camera for the first time, I started taking pictures of people I knew. I just did it a little bit more obsessively in that I wanted to organise who I was taking pictures of.'

'So I took pictures of them standing there and then standing there with their clothes off,' Oswald continues. 'Initially, I was taking pictures of people from all angles and picking all sorts of details, and over the course of a year I was taking 300 or 400 pictures of each person.'

Oswald's obsessive photographic behaviour boiled down into a practical idea when he was asked to make a DVD. 'I was working with the idea of video or cinema that doesn't seem to move,' he says. 'It changes if you're patient, but it doesn't really move.'

Instead of using images of celebrities, Oswald photographed anonymous people of all ages and sizes. After setting up a small studio in Quebec, he plucked models directly off the street, asking them to pose three times—with their clothes on, nude, and for a portrait shot.

*L'Arc d'Apparition* shows still images of 100 of those people, slowly fading in and out, randomly, over a white backdrop. They're in more or less the same position—standing straight, facing the camera—forming a line that varies as subjects emerge in interchanging degrees of presence. Some people are naked, some clothed, though clothes slowly appear and disappear to present bodies in different stages of transparency.

Oswald had a clear-cut reason for photographing his subjects nude. 'When you're photographing somebody for three minutes, quite often the person doesn't seem to be paying attention and there's kind of a glib attitude,' he says. 'When I ask them to be naked I get people who are quite committed. They made a decision that's important to them and I end up getting better photographs.'

As Oswald continues photographing, he regularly shows life-size chronophotic works in museums and galleries. 'I wanted to have that trompe l'oeil idea of seeing something that might fool you into thinking that it's real,' he says. For the version following the DVD, Oswald projected two interwoven images to create CinemaScope-sized film. Eventually this expanded to a five-screen version featuring 1,000 people.

'There's something about these images that can get a hold on you, just like watching the news,' says Oswald about the hypnotic quality of his chronophotics. 'It has the same kind of satisfaction as this non-active staring at something that's interesting—because it keeps changing, you can get hooked on it in the same way as TV. In museums, it was fascinating to see how all kinds of people would accumulate watching this

*Clothes on, clothes off, on, off, on, off.*

thing and just get stuck. It's satisfying finding out how people watch things that aren't frenetic in a way that a lot of visual imagery these days is.

'There are, in fact, thousands of tiny changes per second,' says Oswald about the apparent stillness of the images. 'Although you get confused at first, you go through a slow process of acclimatisation to that. It was very interesting to experiment: how slowly can it change, and how fast can it change without upsetting this process? Because if it changes really fast, you start watching the change rather than the image.'

Amsterdam was a source of inspiration for the composition of these works, says Oswald. 'I was going around to various museums and particularly looking at portraits of the civic guards, like in Rembrandt's 'Nightwatch', where there are these life-size groups of people. I learned quite a bit from studying them and also studying how they were commissioned and shown to the public.'

While Oswald keeps adjusting *Chronophototics*, he also continues working on his music. For a revision of *Plexure* he has collaborated with Jason Forrest, another artist who will appear at Sonic Acts this weekend. '[Forrest] has done a very good job in recent years of putting together transformations of pop music,' says Oswald.

Although it's still complicated using other people's music in terms of copyright laws, Oswald sees a welcome change underway: 'This whole floodgate has been opened of people doing it on a personal level, without any great profit motive,' he says. 'The instances of corporate backlash to that are in a great minority to the amount of stuff that's around. It's an interesting time.'

*John Oswald gives 'A Short Talk on Endlessness' on 26 February at 15:00, De Balie, Kleine Gartmanplantsoen 10, 553 5151. Reserve tickets at De Balie or by emailing info@sonicacts.com. Sonic Acts XI runs until 26 February at De Balie and Paradiso, Weteringschans 6-8, 626 4521. For programme details see www.sonicacts.com.*