



John Oswald
Photo:
anonymous



**Spinvolver
2002**

Photo: John
Oswald



**crowd of
souls 2001**
(detail)

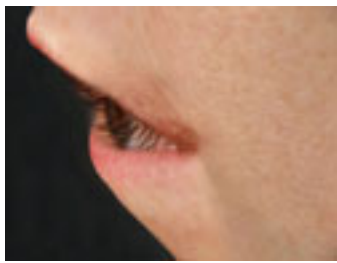
It is fortunate that the Governor General should recognize achievements in the 'media arts.' For it is only a term as open-ended in its compass as 'media' that could possibly serve to embrace the wildly multifarious yet utterly particular art of **John Oswald**. 'Media' is plural, denoting more than one medium. And a medium, in its most basic sense, is a means, any means, of effecting or conveying something, anything. Medium is also a poetically apt word to invoke in the case of John Oswald, as it is directly derived from the Latin word meaning 'the one in the middle.' Oswald throws himself into the middle, or, more correctly, many, many middles. His voracious creative imagination stalks the areas in between traditional cultural categories. However, the aim of this in-betweenness is not to create work that is somehow outside of, or separate from, the kinds of activities these categories usually suggest. On the contrary, Oswald's art is radically inclusive. As he says: "I acknowledge categories mainly as traditional distinctions, ripe with opportunity for bridging in unique ways." Or, as he put it in a recent interview: "I'm sometimes told that this or that thing of mine seems to fall between the cracks of categorization. I'm not very sympathetic to this notion. I think these bridges I'm trying to build are, in fact, intended to span those cracks."

So what does John Oswald do? He does, and/or has done, plunderphonics, mystery tapes, rascali klepitoire, art wrestling, pitch works, spinvolver works and chronophotics, to name just a few of his creative activities. These are, of course, his names, his categories – some of the more obvious examples of John's creative interaction with categorization. He has also described himself as a sound artist. Dance, photography, performance, new media – all are means for his eclectic, category-defying artistic expression. Again, in his own words:

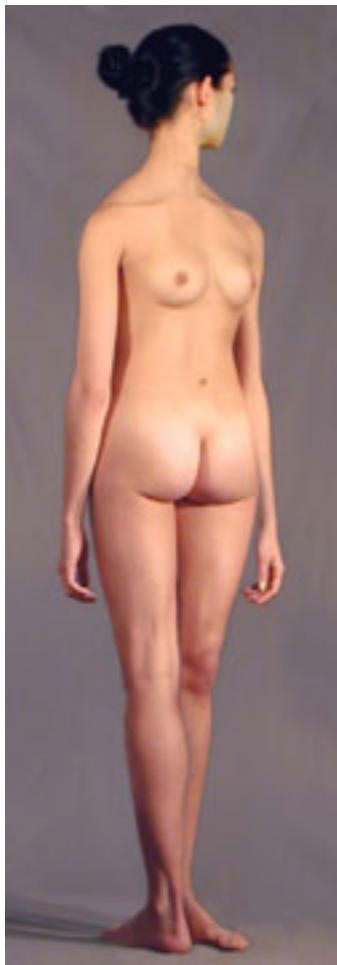
"On reflection, I find that the existence of categorical distinctions in art-making, particularly irrational categorization, is a motivating force for many of my endeavours. It may be a response to a commission. Someone asks for an opera, I immediately think 'what is an opera?' I do have my own categories for most things; it's difficult to talk about anything if one is not willing to make distinctions. But I'm not willing to set these categories down in stone, mostly because I think it is more fruitful to



**Janéad
O'Jakriel 1999**



osciplex 1999



twist 2000

invest in challenging my own distinctions. This is thinking of category as process rather than receptacle.”

This is what one would expect from an artist who claims that the transistor radio was his first instrument.

Listening – or better yet, observing (in every sense of the word), as a creative practice that can open itself onto active intervention and experimentation, is at the heart of all of John Oswald's art. One imagines him *playing* the radio: cutting between musical styles and spoken declarations, allowing them to modulate each other as the dial rests *between* stations, working with the heterophonous incursions of the ever shifting noise-world of radio static.

And his radio playing must surely be the precursor of his plunderphonics. The term plunderphonics has gained currency with at least a margin of popular culture at large; it is even applied to work that has nothing to do with him. It is in common usage within the alternative music press and refers to music that is made from recordings of other people's music. Its widespread currency is related to the ubiquity of samples of others' music in hip-hop and the collage-like appropriations of disc jockey/emcee culture in general. Oswald's art has always aggressively taken part in the debates that surround this kind of music-making – debates about the myths of originality in creative production, about intellectual property and copyright, about the politics of distinguishing the separateness of a work of art from other works of art. These are important debates and Oswald's contribution to them cannot be underestimated.

Since the start of the 1990s Oswald's plunderphonics recordings have sold over 100,000 copies world wide. He has been on the cover of the British magazine *The Wire*, and several of his recordings have made the yearly top-ten lists of publications such as *Rolling Stone*, *The New York Times* and *Spin*.

Oswald is a kind of alchemist (his studio is called mLab, the 'm' standing for mystery). He does not really *use* others' music; rather he transmutes it – he changes its nature and form. The metaphorical invocation of alchemy breaks down somewhat, though, for while transmutation might be at work in Oswald's practice, the alchemist actually changes lead into gold, and it is no longer recognizable as lead. Oswald certainly hopes that the listener recognizes what has been plundered to form his plunderphonics. Yet being able to fill in the cultural texts implicit in his source materials only makes their transmutations more profoundly

strange and wonderful. Case in point: his recent retrospective collection of plunderphonics starts with a 56-second piece, *btls*, that starts with the famous last chord of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album.

John Oswald: “The original E Major chord was created, according to producer George Martin, by having five people, or 10 hands, or in this case, 60 fingers, at three pianos, all simultaneously playing the same chord.... That's the first thing you hear, that last chord. Then you hear the chord again, but a semi-tone higher, as if the 60 fingers crab-walked to the right on the piano one step. The veracity of this aural illusion is very important to me. George Martin, John, Paul, Ringo and Mal could have made very nearly this exact sound by doing what I just described in the studio back in 1967. The third iteration of the chord would require an additional 60 fingers.... Now that you, the listener, are probably getting the idea of this transformation and accumulation, we throw in another element, which is the opening D7/sus4 guitar chord from *A Hard Day's Night*.”

John Oswald's art is specific, particular, idiosyncratic and weirdly intimate. However, the intimacy is not located between Oswald as the offerer of the work and ourselves as its receivers (the sense of an author trying to authorize a correct meaning or assert an intended reception is wonderfully absent or incoherently multiple here). Rather, the intimacy resides in the symbiosis between the precarious, often fragile relationship of elements that inhabit each piece and the wild array of personal associations that spill out of and around the viewer/listener's relationship to the source material and whatever skewed resonances it retains.

Oswald has recently been concentrating more and more on visual art. Still, it is thoroughly coherent with his other art practices, and stems naturally from his plunderphonics experiments. His manipulations of existing music were by this point being worked out in his computer and his awareness of what was possible in the world of digital image-processing grew naturally from his interest in computers as a tool for producing art. (It is a noteworthy evolution from the transistor radio to splicing, record button editing and multitracking tape to samplers to computers.) Some of his first images were amalgams of the features of pop stars – Prince was blended with Annie Lennox, Elvis with Paul McCartney, and so on. On the surface, these images seem obviously analogous to his plunderphonics procedures – the combining/morphing of recognizable materials into new hybrids. However, there is

a significant difference: the recognizability of a pop star is a public-commercial construction. The recognizability of a pop song is something very different. It is intimate; it belongs to the listener, with specific songs forming specific, immutable relationships to specific times in a listener's life. Oswald has always maintained that his plunderphonics has never been about parody, superior critique or surreal juxtaposition. He has always been interested in finding new ways to hear music he loves creating new, intimate relationships.

His newest visual works, his chronophotics (time plus light), bring this level of intimacy to his visual experiments. In them, Oswald digitally photographs subjects holding more or less the same pose, both clothed and naked. He then digitally combines a collection of these photos to form a video or video-projected image that appears to be a crowd looking out at the viewer. Over time, the make-up of the crowd shifts as some members fade away and others slowly appear, while at the same time the clothes of various members fade away and appear. What is shifting before the viewer's eyes is a community of physical and social relationships; significantly, created through bringing together images of members of the actual community the piece is being shown in. Oswald's photographing of the participants with and without their clothes is also important. Their nakedness is again not just a representation of intimacy. Choosing to have a picture taken and shown of yourself without your clothes embodies a very distinct and, for most, strangely rarefied relationship to the process of being photographed, to the photographer, and to the potential viewer. At the same time, it brings the wild specificity of fashion choices into relief. Oswald has been involved with experimental dance for almost 30 years, and this dance awareness is at work here.

As with the plunderphonics, and all of John Oswald's art, this is not just work about intimate relationships, but rather work that seeks to discover new, strange and wonderful intimate relationships.

Martin Arnold is a musician (composer and improviser) based in Toronto.
