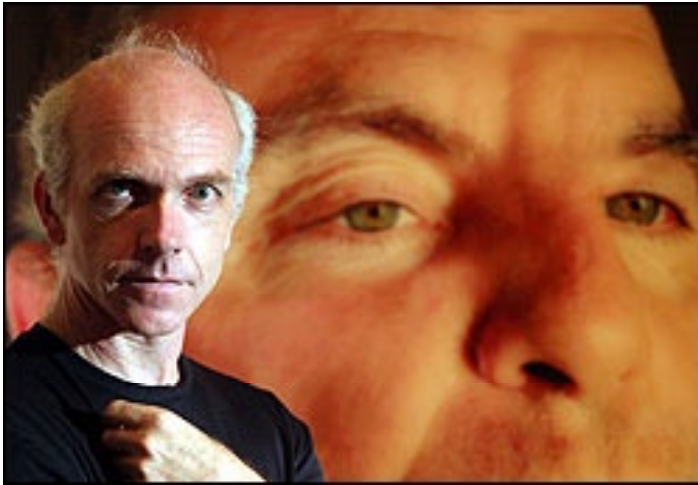


John Oswald presses the pause button



by [PETER GODDARD](#)

With *instandstillnessence*, a wall-long multiple-photo panoramic installation beginning at the Edward Day Gallery next Saturday, visitors will see the image of a row of otherwise ordinary-looking men and women, old, young, chunky, skinny, all standing together shoulder to shoulder, although some seem to be more there, a bit more substantial, than others. In fact, some of the others could be ghosts.

This is not just another painterly mega-photo of the sort that has muscled its way into galleries and museums in recent years. This is a John Oswald mega-photo, which means viewers beware.

Stay in front of the picture long enough, watchers will notice the images of certain individuals slowly disappear then reappear, some emerging naked during the process, others gradually being clothed. These are some of the slowest stripteases in history.

No one actually moves. Only the precise clarity of the picture itself is being manipulated. Yet it's as if this silent crowd is playing hide and seek in a mist that can't really be seen, or that it is walking back and forth through an opaque wall that's not clearly there en route from a room that doesn't exist.

In short, it's classic Oswald. His career — recognized in official circles earlier this year with a Governor-General's Award in Visual and Media Arts — has been one spectacular bit of peek-a-boo after another. In *instandstillnessence*, he tells me, "some people come in more layers than others." (It's an extension of *The Arc of Apparitions*, an Oswald DVD released two years back, of "an image of stillness evolving over time in a never-ending cycle" involving some 80 people photographed by the artist.)

Just about everything he does is unique, although I am especially fond of the only semi-unique Oswald's 1st Piano Concerto by Tchaikovsky (2003). Oswald loves words and inventing categories filled with wordplay, like "chronophotic" for a "time-based image." He's a terrific packager of ideas. For all the complexity of his imagination, he's show business through and through. He calls *Arc* "new chronophotic cinema," which has to be the debut of a new art form. There's a lot more along this line. *The Idea Of This* (1999), written for the National Ballet of Canada, requires the services of a robot piano along with those of a recorded voice and orchestra. (Usually it's the pianist who's robotic, not the piano.) And what about his work for a dancer — Oswald does interpretive dance with friends about once a week — who spends part of the performance on the floor, manually playing a record player positioned on her stomach?

The kicker here is that all this highly original work is made up mostly by what he's borrowed — "plundered" would be his description — from elsewhere. This has led to the fine art of "plunderphonics," which is also the title of Oswald's best-known product, *Plunderphonics* (1969-96), a two-CD set made up entirely of an enormous array of famous sound clips, from the Beatles to Michael Jackson.

An early form of *Plunderphonics* interested Elektra Records and in 1990 the label had Oswald scramble bits and pieces of its catalogue. In 1994, the Grateful Dead brought him on board for the *plunderphonics* treatment. The result was the hour-long *Grayfolded* CD, where 51 different performances of the band's signature tune, "Dark Star," recorded between 1968 and '93, were digitally fused into one.

This led to the ultimate accolade ever paid to a plunderer when *Negativland*, a San Francisco audio anarchist collective, plundered *Plunderphonics* recently to make a cheaper package of the same thing, which it resold, ideal for still more replundering. Oswald thought that was neat when he heard about it.

Trying to pin down which kind of artist he is is like trying to bottle smoke. A much sought-after improvising saxophonist who has written straight musical scores for the like of Kronos Quartet, he began to take his practice in the direction of photography about four years ago, although he describes what he does as "painting with a computer." The *Edward Day* exhibition is his first solo show in a gallery space.

Quite by accident, I discovered what connects everything in his expanding repertoire after he'd phoned me on his cell to say he was right outside the door where we'd agreed to meet.

But he wasn't. He was somewhere down the hall, totally absorbed by the pictures on the wall. But he had been there at the door. And he was coming back, in time, his time. Then I got it. It's always about time.

Oswald, 51, views art — musical, visual or anything in between — from the vantage point of the time taken with it. This gets him deep into William James territory and the psychologist's thoughts about the enormously different amount of information different creatures or different people might be able to absorb over the same amount of time. "Suppose we were able, within the length of a second, to note 10,000 events distinctly, instead of barely 10, as now," James wrote in *Principles Of Psychology*.

So as a composer fascinated with restructuring time — in *Grayfolded*, Jerry Garcia can be heard singing a single note for almost two minutes via Oswald's digital manipulations — it was entirely logical for him to turn to photography, which can do what music can not: freeze time.

"In a gallery — which I like because it's one of the few places without canned music — the fact is you can sit there in front of one image to spend as little or as much time with it," Oswald says after we've finally met up. "But you don't have to. I once went through the Hermitage (the city-blocks-long museum in St. Petersburg, Russia) in half an hour because I only had half an hour. People thought it was kind of weird. I was jogging through the rooms.

"Sometimes something will grab me and I'll stay there for a long time. I went to a (Willem) De Kooning show at the Guggenheim in New York once and I was there from opening to close. I probably looked at only 20 or 30 paintings, but I was there eight hours. They had to kick me out of there.

"I want to do work that has the potential to grab someone for a long period of time, but in that contemplative mode, instead of guiding them through time as you do with music, film and video, etc. (With *instandstillnessence*) you have a still image that has a lot of elements, rather like civic garden paintings from the 18th century by Rembrandt and those guys, where there is a whole pile of people in the picture, there's a relationship between them and lots going on. So people watch it with contemplative attention then they notice, 'Hey, this is changing on me.' It's a fascinating way of working with perception."

Simply put, Oswald wants to reinvent how art works in time. He makes pictures like the portraits in *instandstillnessence* try to behave like pieces of music, by actually functioning in the flow of time.

Conversely, he's finding endless ways of seemingly "freezing" music in time, so it can seem to be fixed there, awaiting contemplation, like a landscape or a portrait. *Aparanthesi* (2000-2003) is an earlier, 65-minute Oswald CD centred on a single note, A (actually, two different tunings of the note A). Of course, any one A is sonically sympathetic with all others, so *Aparanthesi* in fact unfolds an infinity of A's, as if doing the contemplating of the note for the listener.

Of course, this is still music. But it is Oswald's particular genius to lead you to think, at least for a bit, that maybe it's a painting you're hearing.

John Oswald's instandstillnessence and other works are at Edward Day Gallery, 952 Queen St. W., from Sept. 11 to Oct. 4.