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Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence

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# Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence

ANNE M. WAGNER

*I haven't gotten the tape of Paula Jones, so why would I get the tape of this?  
I can't assess what's real and what's not real. And I don't want to.*

—Geraldine Ferraro on Kathleen E. Willey's  
appearance on *60 Minutes* (1998)

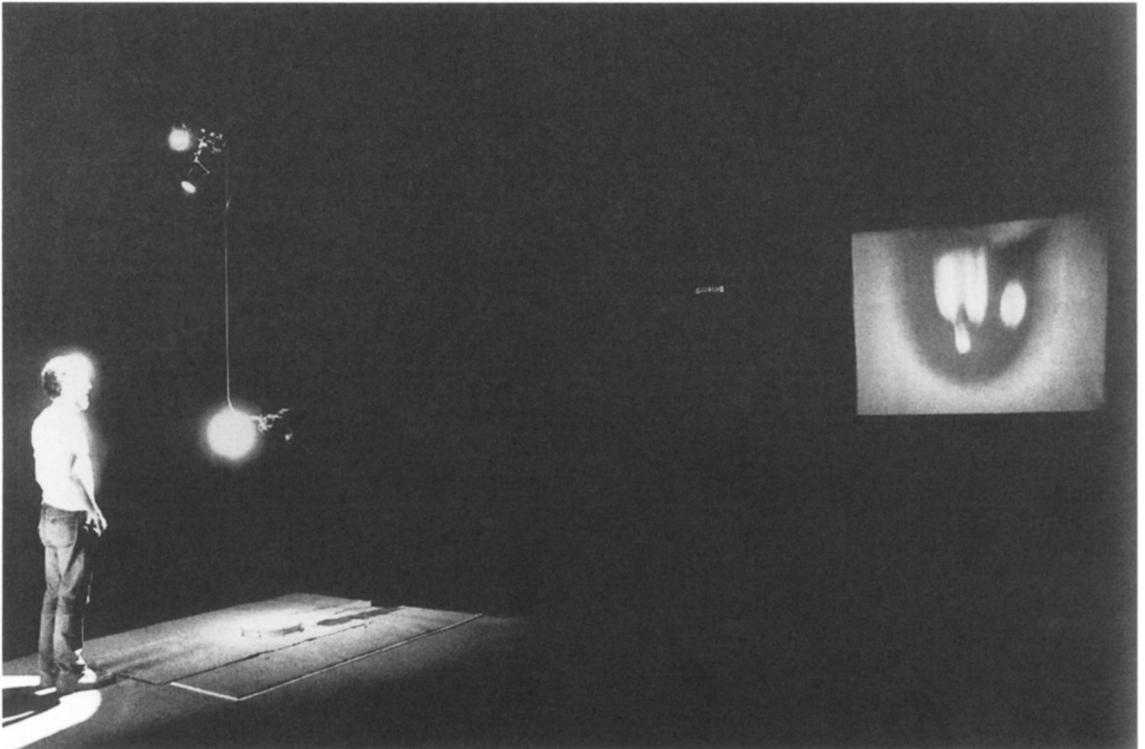
1. Begin with a drop of water forming, filling fat enough to have a surface on which, in reverse, the viewer's image can queasily swim. The drop is a mechanical tear shed by a weeping spigot—a copper waterworks, precisely plumbed. When weight and gravity tear tear from valve, it thunders on an amplified drum. Then a new drop forms, falls, thunders. But this isn't all: a video camera observes the viewer's wonder at the fraught physics of it all. It registers each search for the self in the droplet, watches the viewer jump helplessly on each splashing, booming cue.

The piece, *He Weeps for You*, is by Bill Viola. It was made more than twenty years ago, in 1976, though thinking about its main characteristics—or at least some of them—I'm not sure if a viewer's first instinct would put it so far in the past. So much of what makes Viola's work seem current—what made the media take such enthusiastic notice of his recent retrospective—is contained there, even though the artist himself nowadays dismisses the “primitive” technology that then gave them form. But primitive or not, many of his key ideas and their attendant sensations are already present in this dripping waterworks. There is, for example, the effect of high dramatics offered in or as serial repetition, and the concurrent shock or stress repeatedly dealt to the viewer's nerves. There is Viola's wonder at the world's minutiae, as focused in the image of the oceanic self afloat in the water drop: the artist is asking us to mobilize Pascal's realization of the divine unity linking the infinitude of large and small, and to rewrite it as sensory spectacle—the Hollywood of the soul.<sup>1</sup> Last—and most obvious—there is the quasi-

1. Viola himself has written of this piece as a reflection of Sufism, with each falling droplet standing for a birth and death. See Bill Viola, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (Cambridge: MIT Press,

religious subtext to the whole scenario: think back to the work's not-quite-parodic title, *He Weeps for You*.

Of course, "he" might plausibly be the artist. The piece, after all, uses his drips and plumbing, and his floating visage figures as the published document of the effect of the swelling drop. And if "he" is indeed the artist, then the work might be said to take on a retrospective cast. It looks back—not too far, but still back—to a past from which in 1976 Viola's work was just emerging: the immediate past of performance and video art. In this not-too-distant moment, behavior and coercion meant everything to the making of art, with both artist and viewer feeling the pressure as never before. What was performed in performance, what was observed in video, are the uncertainties that by 1970 or thereabouts had begun to accumulate around "artist" and "viewer" as art's two essential correlative terms. (The idea of the "artwork" had already lost much of its clout.) In 1970 these categories themselves started to drip, with confidence in their old contents slowly leaking away. I think that artists who used video thought most about the seepage, but could do little to stem the flow. They did, however, realize that this same leakage could be channeled for use as the subject of their art, as well as dramatized as its chief effect.



*Bill Viola. He Weeps for You. 1976.*

2. “The arts require witnesses.”<sup>2</sup> This dictum may seem self-evident, yet its obviousness nonetheless requires some explanation. For I am gambling that this statement *does* seem obvious to present-day readers—so apparent, so uncontroversial that its long-distant origins in the writing of an eighteenth-century Frenchman, Jean-François Marmontel, appear beside the point. If assurances are needed about this writer’s credentials, they may be found in the information that he functioned as an authority on criticism—he was, in 1756, the author of a founding definition, the article on “Critique” published in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*—in an age when modern ideas of art and audience were in their infancy. What needed tying down in the mid-eighteenth century, of course, was who those witnesses were to be and how they would matter to both the future course of culture and the direction of public events—what and how, therefore, they might be given to see. It is satisfying for our sense of Marmontel’s standing with contemporary painters that one of his novels—it mined the story, which Procopius tells, of the once-victorious general Belisarius, who at the emperor Justinian’s tyrannical instigation was blinded, exiled, and reduced to penury despite his valiant service—became a key vehicle and mainstay of artists’ efforts to transform viewers into witnesses by dint of their deployment of painting’s abilities to testify.<sup>3</sup> The story was summoned, in other words, like a midwife to deliver a bourgeois public for art: it puts us, so it has often been claimed, in the birth chamber of modern art. The narrative’s most spectacular progeny is that painted by Jacques-Louis David, who in 1781 placed before the public a canvas, *Belisarius Asking for Alms*, that establishes its themes of blindness and sight as a counterpoint between youth and age, male and female, knowledge and ignorance, gaze and gesture—and secures all these effects with a special effort to make us grasp their physical and spatial logic, to give them autonomy and conviction, hence moral and emotional charge. All this is registered in the eloquent palm of the general, deep-etched with the lines of his life; it is there too in his blind eyes and speaking mouth; there in the sun’s sheen on fingertips, armor, and helmet. Light glints cruelly bright from the staring eyes of the gargoyle that is the helmet’s crest. Helmet turned begging bowl: remember that dramatic reversal is

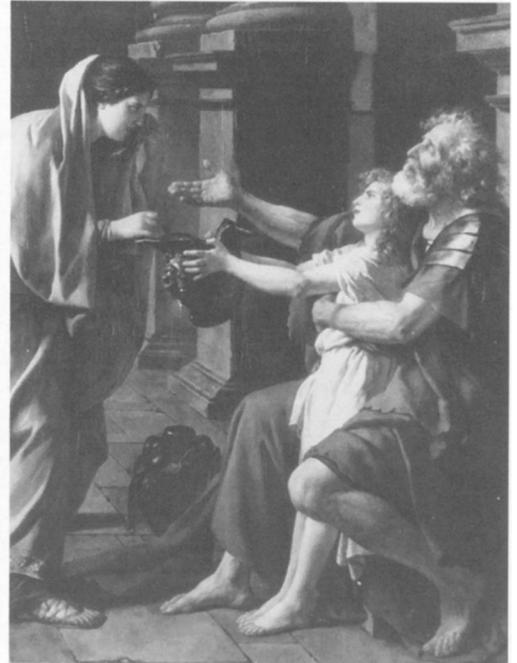
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1995), pp. 42–43. The remark qualifying the technology used in the piece as primitive is to be found in the brochure accompanying the Los Angeles showing of the Viola retrospective at MOCA in spring 1998.

2. Jean-François Marmontel, as quoted by Paul Virilio, in *The Vision Machine* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), p. 1. Virilio’s footnote acknowledges that this “quotation” is really an adaptation of a dictum that appears in Marmontel’s *Contes moraux*: “Music is the only talent that can be enjoyed by itself; all others require witnesses.”

3. Jean-François Marmontel, *Belisaire*, 1767. Although David used this painting to gain entrance to the Académie, its subject was his own choice, not an official assignment. For a survey of the theme, which focuses on the tragic outcome of tyranny, and its impact on French painting of the 1780s, see A. Boime, “Marmontel’s *Belisaire* and the Pre-Revolutionary Progressivism of David,” *Art History* 3, no. 1 (March 1980), pp. 81–101.

Jacques Louis David. *Belisarius Asking for Alms*. 1781.



the engine of the plot. Such details transfix and convince: they underline art's claim on the power and veracity of sight. A witness, remember, is someone who sees and knows firsthand: it seems right to attribute to David no little confidence that a witness would be the more completely persuaded when addressed so insistently, in such a declarative mode. David's work insists that optical vividness is the necessary vehicle for an overtly public painting; the same vividness guarantees such painting's concomitant political scope.

3. An artist leaves his studio. He is Vito Acconci. In the course of three weeks in October 1969, he follows the same strictly formulated "daily scheme": the program demands "choosing a person at random, in the street, any location; following him wherever he goes, however long or far he travels (the activity ends when he enters a private place—his home, office, etc.)."<sup>4</sup> Note that this brief imposes one major constraint on the artist: while he must stick with his quarry on buses and in the subway, in shoe shops and bookstores, on streets and in parks, the one-sided

4. Vito Acconci, *Avalanche* 6 (Fall 1972), p. 31. The commonsensical spatial parameters Acconci establishes in the program for the piece, which understand a person as "in public" when on the street and "in private" when inside an office or dwelling, do not accord with U.S. legal understanding of the private, which has come into play in the wake of the milestone essay by Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, "The Right to Privacy," *Harvard Law Review* 4, no. 193 (1890). As explained by Robert C. Post, an intrusion on an individual's privacy occurs not when spatial barriers are violated but when "social personality," as upheld by "civility rules," is injured. See his "The Social Foundations of Privacy: Community and Self in the Common Law Tort," *California Law Review* 77, no. 5, (October 1989), pp.

compact is broken only when the unknowing subject “goes private.” Only then does Acconci give up the chase. Tailing, he is tailed by a photographer, Betsy Jackson; when we spell out her presence, the two recognized parties to the piece become three; its participants swell to four when the viewer acknowledges that any looker has his or her own location in its strict temporal and spatial sequencing. Each player is bound to the next in a logic of mutual dependence and deferral; yet the sequence nonetheless begins and ends with a subject in ignorance, blind to his role as object in the artist’s tracking game.<sup>5</sup>

4. An artist leaves her studio. She is Laurie Anderson. In the course of a day in June 1973, she takes photographs of the ten men who accost her in the street with what she terms “unsolicited comments of the ‘hey, baby’ type.”<sup>6</sup> She asks permission first. Her accosters are mostly pleased and flattered to comply. She answers their pleasure with banter, smiles, and laughter; does her compliance facilitate the easy, close-up portraits she is able to secure? Later in her studio, she responds to her accosters differently, as if now to undermine their ease; like an investigative reporter preparing an evidential dossier, and mindful of the law, she imposes anonymity on her informants: a wedge of white neatly cuts off their eyes. In this case the gesture seems less protective than offensive; in the name of privacy she inflicts blindness, even a kind of objecthood, on subjects who had started out by treating her that way.

5. Nowhere in either of these works, Acconci’s *Following Piece* and Anderson’s *Object/Objection/Objectified*, do we find any traces of the urban utopianism or exuberant breadth of vision that might come with making Manhattan your studio and stomping ground. On the contrary, here vision itself is a faculty to be tracked and erased, documented and suppressed, stymied and deferred. What stands in vision’s way? The first obstacle is privacy; the second—however paradoxically,

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958–66. Post’s argument draws importantly from the writing of Erving Goffman, an author whom Acconci himself read circa 1970; the notion of “social personality,” which Post glosses, is an ideal construct, a conception of the version of personality upheld by the rules of civility and deference at play in any given community (p. 963). It seems to me that Post’s formulations are also useful in divorcing Acconci’s performance from the misconception that they most importantly concern individual personalities—including the artist’s—rather than more abstract and theoretical ideas. They also point usefully to the limits of using the artist’s own explanations of the works as adequate accounts of their content. See also Robert C. Post, “Rereading Warren and Brandeis: Privacy, Property and Appropriation,” *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 41, no. 3 (1991), pp. 647–80.

5. My analysis has profited from the discussion provided by Craig Dworkin in “In Other Words: Vito Acconci and the Body of the Text.” unpublished paper, 1995.

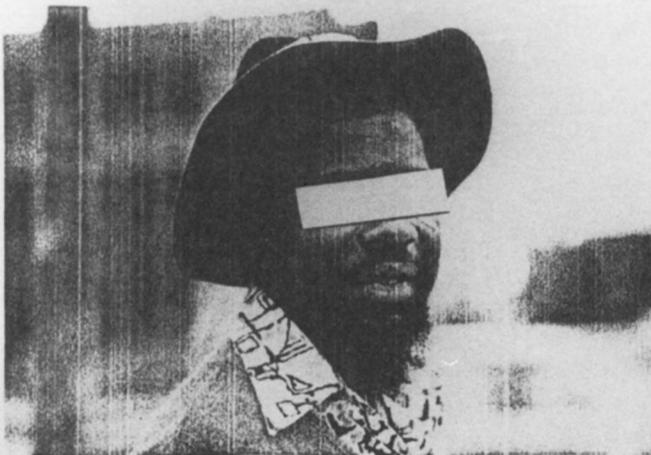
6. The citation is taken from the text prepared by Anderson to accompany the work. Titled *Object/Objection/Objectivity*, it was first shown at the Harold Rivkin Gallery, Washington, D.C., in 1973. See Janet Kardon, *Laurie Anderson: Works from 1969 to 1983* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1983).



*Vito Acconci. Following Piece. 1969. Photo: Betsy Jackson.*



*THIS MAN WAS STANDING AT THE NEWSSTAND ON THE CORNER OF HOUSTON STREET AND FIRST AVENUE. "HOW 'YA DOIN' HONEY?" HE SAID. WHEN I ASKED TO TAKE HIS PICTURE HE SAID, "AN OLD GOAT LIKE ME?" I SAID HE LOOKED LIKE MY UNCLE AND I WANTED HIM TO SEE HIS DOUBLE. "HA HA HA" HE LAUGHED. "POOR GUY LOOKS JUST LIKE ME."*



*THIS MAN IS OFTEN IN A PARK ON HOUSTON STREET. WHEN I PASS, HE USUALLY SAYS, "HI, THERE SWEET 'LIL ANGEL," BUT BECAUSE OF HIS HEAVY SPANISH ACCENT, IT SOUNDS LIKE "SWEET 'LIL ANGLE" OR SOMETIMES, "SWEET 'LIL ANGLO." WHEN I ASK TO TAKE HIS PICTURE, HE APPEARS TO BE PLEASED. "SEE YOU IN MY DREAMS, SWEET 'LIL ANGEL," HE SAYS.*

given these artists' investigative tactics, their sleuthing and use of photographs—is our belief in the document.<sup>7</sup> For neither the evidential status of these works nor their willed omissions are exactly designed to inspire the viewer's trust in the documentary truth of what she sees. Thus it is both coincidence, and no coincidence at all, that in the background of photographs from both pieces appear reminders of the complexity and aggression of their testimonial claims. In Acconci's it is the sign that reads "SIGNS": a false declaration, it acts like a lure to the viewer, one that purports to label and identify what appears in view. In one of Anderson's photographs appears another sign. It is a prohibition, rather than a declaration, and only a partial one at that: "KEEP/PRIVATE," it enjoins, repeating the lesson that Acconci has already taught us in another way. Yet neither sign finally offers much certainty about exactly *why* signs and meanings and privacy might be taken to have such standing in either of these artist's work.

7. This sometimes aggressively investigative stance can be usefully contrasted with the "forensic" practices discussed in Ralph Rugoff et al., *Scene of the Crime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), not so much apropos of the artist's posture as in terms of scene and trace.



Anderson. *Object/Objection/Objectivity*. 1973.

6. What is remarkable about performance art around 1970 is precisely how preoccupied it was by questions of this type. How might the artist intersect with a public? Which public where? One it chose, or encountered, or conjured into being through its own fantasy? Would the public itself find the artist, perhaps? How? Once located, what would art's audience then be made to witness? Or, rather, should we say *endure*? Although it is clear that performance and video both prided themselves from the outset on an up-to-the-minute ability to instance these questions, it is still notable that the preoccupation with audience took on signally aggressive, even manic, desperate, and coercive form.<sup>8</sup> Why should this be the case? The question is worth asking, for with those aggressions and coercions opens an especially anxious chapter in the history of modernist art. These anxieties are very much of their moment: witness the extent to which Viola's recent work, for example—stemming as it does from a rather different artistic climate—mostly seems to paper them over, replacing them instead with a confident deployment of sublimely spectacular wonders, (re)familiarizing his viewers with a whole catalog of resuscitated “humanist” effects.

7. Let me spell out not just what these worries amounted to, but how they took visual form. I am not alone in proposing Acconci's work as something of a defining case. It has seemed that way at least since 1976, though in my view for reasons that tantalizingly sidestep the point. The key issue concerns the work-ings—the circuitry—of video's resources and terms of address. Most tantalizing of all is Rosalind Krauss's thinking along these lines. In 1976, writing in the first issue of *October*, she published a polemic entitled “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” which traced the author's condemnation of the medium's defining solipsism back to a single source, a center. This was Acconci's video *Centers*, a performance in which for precisely twenty-two minutes and fifteen seconds the artist points fixedly at the video camera. His finger wanders, his arm tires, yet the artist still holds his pose. Having arranged things so that his gaze and gesture appear at the center of the monitor, Acconci seems, according to Krauss, to stare at himself:

As we look at the artist sighting along his outstretched arm and forefinger towards the center of the screen we are watching, what we see is a sustained tautology: a line of sight that begins at Acconci's plane of vision and ends at the eyes of his projected double. In that image of self-regard is configured a narcissism so endemic to works of video that I find myself wanting to generalize it as *the* condition of the entire genre.<sup>9</sup>

8. For a particularly manic instance, see Charlemagne Palestine's *Island Song* (16:29 min.) in which a camera is positioned in the place of the driver on a motorcycle that then careens at breakneck speed around the circumference of an island.

9. Rosalind Krauss, “Video, The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *October* 1 (Spring 1976), p. 51. Although I disagree with Krauss's reading of *Centers*, her essay remains one of the most stimulating studies of

As indeed Krauss does. She takes *Centers* to exemplify video's defining self-absorption, its hermeticism, which serves to enclose the body between two machines, camera and monitor. And Krauss further understands this relation as syntactical: "the body," she writes, "is therefore as it were centered between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis."<sup>10</sup> The analogy means, of course, that the body ought to be considered to be held in qualified suspension: it is bracketed just as is a linguistic phrase or sign.

8. One striking consequence of Krauss's argument is its own bracketing of the language that Acconci's body actually seems to speak. If *Centers* were a poem, we would be forced willy-nilly to attend to its use of a key rhetorical figure, apostrophe—forced to take cognizance of its direct address to some dead or absent figure, some thing or abstract idea. But Krauss is concerned with medium, and her omission is more strategic than ideological: *Centers* serves her as a foil. Its camera and monitor make the man and his gesture quite literally parenthetical to her line of thought; the argument depends on holding their rhetorical implications in suspension—indeed, on closing them out of the logic of her account. It is as if the tight circuitry linking Acconci's gaze and gesture somehow makes it impossible to take up the implications of their vehement address. Nor does the *idea* of the viewer matter to her claims. My argument rests, by contrast, on the suggestion that these "parentheses" only apparently enforce a closure: the technology of the monitor opens outward, as well as in. Not only does it register a process of surveillance, it itself asks for monitoring.

9. For, if *Centers* records the artist's pointing at himself, he also points at the viewer.<sup>11</sup> As long as he has an audience, his gesture aims to find and fix it in its line of force. Indeed, this purpose is so relentlessly single-minded that it will continue when no one is there: the gaze of the camera and the gaze of the artist are still both projected aggressively out to the other side of the TV screen. I say "aggressively" because of the sheer insistence of the gesture: Acconci is doing something that seems, among other things, really rather rude. Pointing is something one is

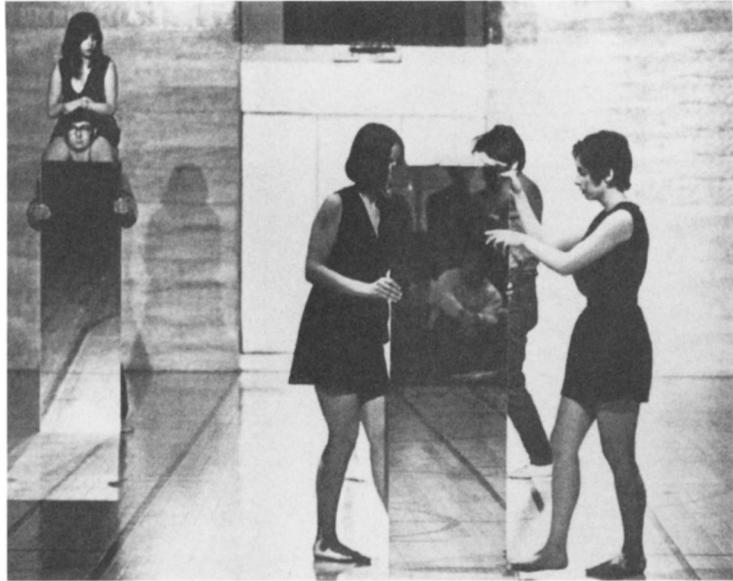
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video to date, and one whose interest seems to me underscored by its use as her contribution to the inaugural issue of *October*. Twenty-three years later, the decision looks prescient: it testifies to the allure the medium then held in the art world, which it is only now beginning to regain, albeit on different terms. I note further that among the works considered below, my treatment of Benglis's *Now* and Serra's *Boomerang* deliberately returns to works that mattered to Krauss's effort to establish the parameters of a *critical* practice of video.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

11. It should be said that Krauss sees Acconci's pointing gesture as the ironic crux of the work. By these lights the piece is a parody that is "clearly intended to render nonsensical a critical engagement with the formal properties of a work, or indeed, a genre of works, such as 'video.'" The kind of criticism *Centers* attacks is obviously one that takes seriously the formal qualities of a work, or tries to assay the particular logic of a given medium" (52).

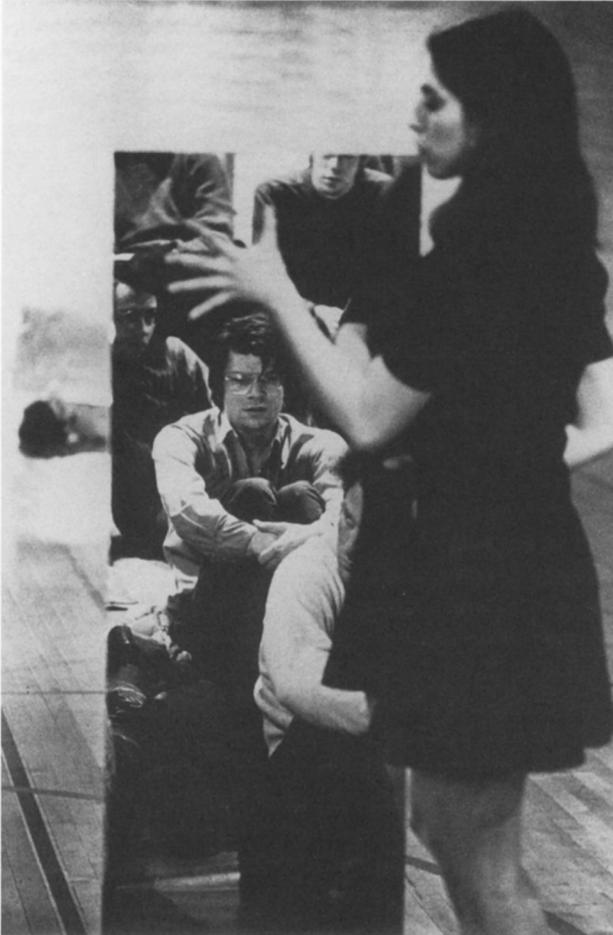
Joan Jonas. Mirror Piece. 1970. Photo: Peter Moore. © Estate of Peter Moore.



taught not to do. I can hear my mother's voice now: "Don't point; it's not polite"—though I cannot remember her ever saying why. If *Centers* were a poem, then it could never be said to be using the well-worn "Dear Reader" as its chosen form of address. "Yo!" maybe, or "Hey!" The pointing gesture similarly breaches the middle-class protocol of decent noninvolvement with one's neighbor; insistently selecting and specifying, it threatens to invade privacy's buffer zone. The strategy reminds me, in its silent aggression, of another Acconci performance, his 1970 *Proximity Piece*. Think of the artist haunting the Jewish Museum during the "Software" show; the piece consisted of choosing someone to stand close to, then crowding the unsuspecting target till he or she moved away.<sup>12</sup> Pointing is the same kind of violation, concentrated in a single digit: surely it is best left to grand symbolic figures to whom mere manners can never apply: to God, to Lord Kitchener, and, of course, to Uncle Sam—to those lofty paternal figures, in other words, with the authority to summon, rebuke, and specify.

10. For a viewer to decide she can elude being targeted by Acconci's index finger is to try to opt out of what video aims to do: to summon you into the present moment, as an audience, and sometimes, under selected circumstances, to make you all-too-conscious of that fact. By these means the performance becomes double-sided; actor and viewer are locked in a pas de deux. Or three, or four, or twenty. Think back to all the occasions, in the early 1970s, when performance deploys its

12. More than *Centers*, *Proximity Piece* is a performance that comes closer to manifesting the kind of invasive behavior that might potentially intrude on "social personality," as defined above in note 4, regardless of the actual injury done to any individual target.



*Jonas. Mirror Piece. 1970.*

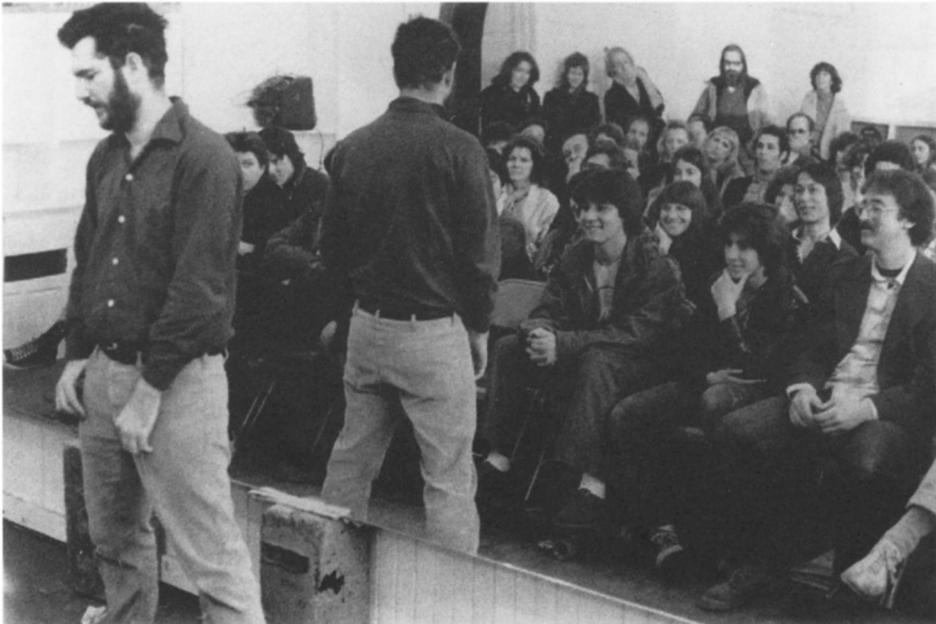
various optical technologies—mirrors, for example, and photo and movie cameras, as well as the video camera and monitor—to foreground an audience’s understanding that *it* is what is being seen. There is Joan Jonas in 1970, to take just one instance, working with a team of collaborators who deploy body-sized mirrors; the kind that slot themselves easily onto the back of the bathroom door. The mirrors face the audience, which thus faces itself. (Some audience members, like Robert Smithson, whose reflection is captured in the photographic documentation of the piece, seem to have remained altogether unruffled by the forced encounter with their public selves.)<sup>13</sup> There is Dan Graham, who in *Performer/Audience/Mirror*

13. For this work by Jonas, see Douglas Crimp, ed., *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions, 1968–1982* (Berkeley, Calif.: University Art Museum, 1983), pp. 14–18. Smithson seems, on the basis of the extant documentation, to have attended New York performances pretty faithfully in the years around 1970; he also appears in the photographs documenting Acconci’s 1969 performance *Twelve Pictures*, discussed below. I am grateful to Bill Berkson for pointing out Smithson’s presence, along with Nancy Holt, in the audience.

(a piece enacted and recorded at various junctures from 1975–77) embroils his audience in minutely observed description of exactly what is going on at the present moment, as he faces first them, then the mirror.<sup>14</sup> His descriptions are profoundly trivial—they detail coughs and fidgets, coats being doffed and glasses polished—but they still serve to summon and produce the audience as both a whole and a collectivity of parts. Meanwhile the artist’s relentless patter produces and enforces a continuous present for the duration of the piece. But the effect of presence can be achieved with even greater economy. When in 1969 Acconci attempted such an experiment with a New York audience, his techniques were bone-simple. On one occasion he walked across an unlit stage, facing the darkened house. On the way he took twelve photographs, using an Instamatic and three flashcubes. It somehow plays into our sense of the success of this rudimentary work that its audience fought back with their own prosthetics: one man produced and deployed another camera, a woman quickly slipped on dark glasses, both acting as if in self-defense. But deflecting Acconci’s invasion was even easier on the second occasion, a 1969 work called *Performance Test*. For this piece, he simply stared

14. The piece is documented in Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 114–15.

*Dan Graham. Performer/Audience/Mirror. 1977.*





*Acconci. Twelve Pictures. 1969. The Theater, New York.*

at his chosen targets. He looked at each person in the audience, he claims, “from left to right, front to back, for thirty seconds each.”<sup>15</sup> With this sequential protocol begins a game of optical chicken, with viewer and performer holding, then losing, each other’s eyes. Eventually the viewers refuse to look. No wonder Acconci’s description of the piece declares baldly, “Audience looks at performance, performance looks back at it—the gaze of the audience results in nothing, is turned back on itself.”<sup>16</sup>

11. These moments of vision and reflection, of eye contact and strategic evasion, put their own spin on a founding Minimalist effect. Think back to Robert Morris’s *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)*, a work first fabricated in January 1965 of Plexiglas laminated to a wood volume scaled to thirty-six inches per side. Installed together in the gallery, the four cubes map a square, its dimensions determined by those of the space in which they sit. But they also exchange an endless volley of reflections. Or should we say crossfire, the better to suggest the hectic back and forth of the reflective exchange?<sup>17</sup> Neither term quite satisfies, because both suggest these cubes could help themselves, could drop the ball or hold their fire, if only they wanted to. But they cannot, at least until the lights go out. It is easy to understand why Michael Fried described Minimalism’s programmatic experiments with perception as an episode in the “natural history of sensibility.”<sup>18</sup> The phrase suggests that its effects have a discomfiting inevitability, that Minimalist sculpture will automatically administer its dose of perceptual stimuli, come what may. Nor does the Minimalist object discriminate among its viewers: it obstructs and reflects them all equally, “naturally,” without anxiety. The Minimalist sculpture, we might say, exemplifies limitless confidence that it can and will manipulate such witnesses as happen to come its way. Morris’s viewers cannot help themselves; in this they are like his cubes.

12. What separates video and performance from the effects set in motion by Morris’s mirrored cubes? Not, I think, their desire to deploy or manipulate their viewers; this is something all these media share. The difference involves a new

15. Both of these 1969 pieces, *Twelve Pictures* and *Performance Test*, are documented in *Avalanche 6* (Fall 1972), p. 45.

16. *Ibid.*

17. “Crossfire” is used by Rosalind Krauss to describe the “mutual reflections set up by the surfaces of the four facing blocks.” See Krauss, *Robert Morris: The Mind-Body Problem* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), p. 12.

18. Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art* (New York: E. Dutton, 1968), p. 117. Fried’s exact words only emphasize the implication of non-volitional necessary responses that Minimalism mobilizes: “From its inception, literalist art has amounted to something more than an episode in the history of taste. It belongs rather to the history—almost the *natural* history—of sensibility; and it is not an isolated episode but the expression of a general and pervasive condition.”

admission of worry about how and if such a relationship might still be engineered. And it entails an anxiety about the publicness of such encounters urgent enough to summon the artist out from “behind” the work to stand or act in its place.<sup>19</sup> How can a work make itself public? Can object and viewer still continue to be so efficiently *present* to each other, so mutually absorbed? Will the artist’s apostrophe go unheeded? Will it fail to conjure a viewer into life and presence and connection with its chosen forms? Can the old requirement—art’s need for witnesses—continue to be sustained? And, if so, with what measure of vividness and veracity? Does confidence in the directness of vision really survive translation and reproduction by technological media?

13. Can confidence in the directness of vision really survive translation and reproduction by technological media? It seems to me that when performance actively joined forces with reproductive technologies around 1970, the alliance was what allowed this question to be explored, rather than naturalized. This is true whether technology means mirror or monitor, or whether the resultant image is moving or still. And it is true because both partners in the compact press claims for and assurances of their own veracity. The claims are contradictory, certainly: the uses and abuses of the performer’s body underwrite one set of sensations of authenticity, while the tape or photograph guarantees its testimony on different grounds. Sometimes the two elide. When body and technology come together, however, the result uproots confidence in art’s ability to testify.

14. Take a video made by Lynda Benglis in 1973. She called it *Now*, with the title an explicitly ironic acknowledgment of a present collapsed and deferred when confronted by its prerecorded past. The piece consists of the artist, whose head alone is shown in profile, making repeated efforts to face—to mirror—her own image, in the form of a prerecorded profile view. The game extends past mere matching or imitation, toward a kind of intercourse, as first one head, then the other, extends an almost preternaturally phallic tongue, and the word *now* cues a clumsy effort at a kiss. Along with a relentlessly repetitive soundtrack, broken by noises off-camera, this is the extent of the action: when past enters the present in the form of an image, it means that Benglis’s *now* never arrives. Nor do we discover what would happen if it did. Would the tongue probe, the kiss be brought off, would some satisfying erotic circuitry be sparked? “Now, is it now?” she asks. “Now? No, *now*.” Her litany sounds like a philosopher of language showing students how words depend for meaning on their uses in any speech act. “Now? No, *now*.” All

19. The contrast established here between *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)* and subsequent video/performance is not meant to elide or discount Morris’s own investigations into the interrelationships among artist, work, and public, as sustained from 1962 onward. One profitable distinction between his work and those that concern me here might be drawn through the ways his performances demonstrate their greater concern with issues of artistic identity and authorship.

through the piece the artist keeps vacillating in tone. Commands keep yielding to questions: “Start recording!” “Do you wish to direct me?” We await clarification on the issue of who’s in charge: which voice, person, image, or moment might register some decisive claim to be calling the imagistic shots.

15. Now. With *Now* we are ready, I think, to take a further step in this inquiry into the subjective and performative effects of video art. There are several such subjects and effects, of course: here I am meaning to address the ways that video once offered its viewers an account of art’s place in a technological world. In video around 1970, certain categories of knowledge and experience were put up for grabs. Truth and trust are prime among them: the truth of our senses and faculties, our trust in the terms by which the artist/performer makes his appeal. We are made witness to moments when confidence in such stabilities is stressed and begin to fail. Even the most basic faculties start to go. In Richard Serra’s 1974 *Boomerang*, for example, Nancy Holt is brought to the edge of aphasic disorder by the simple device of a microphone that picks up her words and returns them to her, but with a split second’s delay. What happens to Holt is that she is made to inspect, even to inhabit, the invisible line between present and past. She witnesses her own words, at just the moment when they ought to have passed out of mind. Still present in the present, the past slows down the artist’s thought and voice. As a result, we see her staring into a void, out of which language falls because technological artifice makes it too present, too insistent, too public, to be endured. Though the gap is simulated and correctable, its effects *really happen*; watching Holt struggle with a toxic media overdose, the viewer encounters something she can only be convinced is real. That this is a technologically induced effect may seem self-evident: should anyone fail to take the message, the tape of *Boomerang* that is currently in circulation—a tape which we can only take as the definitive, archival version of the piece—uses no less than two separate devices to make the point: not only does it include an “equipment breakdown” during which Holt recovers herself completely, but a second interruption—an Amarillo, Texas, station logo—cuts across the screen, as if Serra is insisting his viewers know exactly where they are, and recognize that it is in the realm of the TV network that such destabilizations occur.<sup>20</sup>

16. Video and performance artists, I am claiming, have courted effects of presence, in the endless present—the absolute publicity—that their medium so ably supplies. They do their utmost to invoke settings and artifacts and experiences

20. Serra’s brief piece *Television Delivers People* (1973), which was also shown on television in Amarillo, is an even more explicit criticism of the medium; it is discussed in detail in the course of an interview conducted by Annette Michelson. See “The Films of Richard Serra: An Interview,” in Richard Serra, *Writings/Interviews* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 73–75. The interview finds Serra stating the purpose of this piece as comparative and analytic: “we decided to use language together with Muzak to say something definite about the different natures of video and TV, and why artists find themselves in a dilemma when dealing with broadcast television” (p. 73).

that connote the problematic real of technologically mediated experience. As does television: remember that according to David Antin, TV in particular always raises issues of truth and lie.<sup>21</sup> And instantaneity—absolute, self-renewing presence—is its overall golden rule—and its illusion, needless to say. “See hockey the moment it happens, right in your living room!” I am quoting a line of copy from a Philco advertisement that ran in *Life* in 1951. The adman’s injunction helps us recall that truth and immediacy have been on special offer since the beginning of the 1950s, when TV began to dominate the entertainment marketplace.<sup>22</sup> Remember likewise that the video artist’s favorite setup borrows from vintage TV’s mostly straightforward camera work; the artist’s camera likewise seems to be relentlessly staring straight ahead. And it, too, works on assignment and on location, whether in studios or auditoriums or city streets, and borrows the conventions and expressions of other forms of imagistic vérité: the mug shot or talking head, the tape recorder, the station logo, the sound stage direction. “Start recording.” The rolling camera takes due note of the video artist’s injunctions, but it is part of the artist’s purpose, not the camera’s, that nothing ever seems really to get underway.

17. Start recording. In Acconci’s *Undertone* (1972), the camera is rolling before the performer comes on the scene. By the time he settles in his chair at the far end of an empty table, we too have settled into the role the interview setup apparently provides. The drab setting and plain wooden table seem to lend juridical purpose to the viewer’s presence; if we are here to witness, then Acconci is here to confess. The stage is set for what legal scholars have called, speaking of the criminal confession, the “story of the closed room,” the disclosure that happens once accused and interrogator finally sit face-to-face.<sup>23</sup> The street noises that reach this interior only add to the gritty vérité. In this context Acconci confesses at length, though to different purposes, summoning fantasies of presence and absence, conjuring a girl who is and is not under the table, who does and does not stroke and caress him, who is and is not keying his tone of erotic reverie. Does *she* do it, or does he? In this sensational narrative—it goes on for more than forty minutes—each sequence of fantasies is introduced formulaically, like a mantra or litany

21. David Antin, “Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium,” first published as “Television, Video’s Frightful Parent,” *Artforum* 14 (December 1975), reprinted in *Video Art: An Anthology*, ed. I. Schneider and B. Korot (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), p. 177. Antin’s essay provides a good survey of the history of television, as do a number of essays in D. Hall and S. J. Piper, eds., *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture with the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990).

22. See B. Rosenberg and D. M. White, *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press and Falcon’s Wing Press, 1957), pp. 345–87, for an early set of sociologists’ evaluations of the impact of TV on contemporary American life.

23. Peter Brooks, “Storytelling without Fear? Confession in Law and Literature,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 8 (Winter 1996).



Jonas. Mirror Check. 1970. Photo by Roberta Neiman.

tried on as a version of the truth: “I want to believe . . . ,” breathes Acconci, with his *desire* both to fantasize and to believe in fantasy, taking precedence for a brief moment over the daydream he then starts to spin. But he soon sits rocking in an onanistic, autistic cocoon. When he speaks to the camera, which he does on a regular cycle, the spell is broken. He couches each refrain sent in the viewer’s direction in assured and insistent terms: “I need you to be sitting there facing me, because I have to have someone to talk to, to address this to.” Or later, “I need you to be out there, to be a screening device, to screen out all my lies, filter out all my lies, to separate my lies from the real part. I need you to believe the real part, to filter out the lies, so that I can have the real part for myself.”

No one addressed in this manner can be in much doubt about the role they are being asked to take. (Is it any surprise to such an audience that David Antin once compared the look of *Undertone* to the staging of a presidential address?<sup>24</sup>)

24. Antin, p. 182.

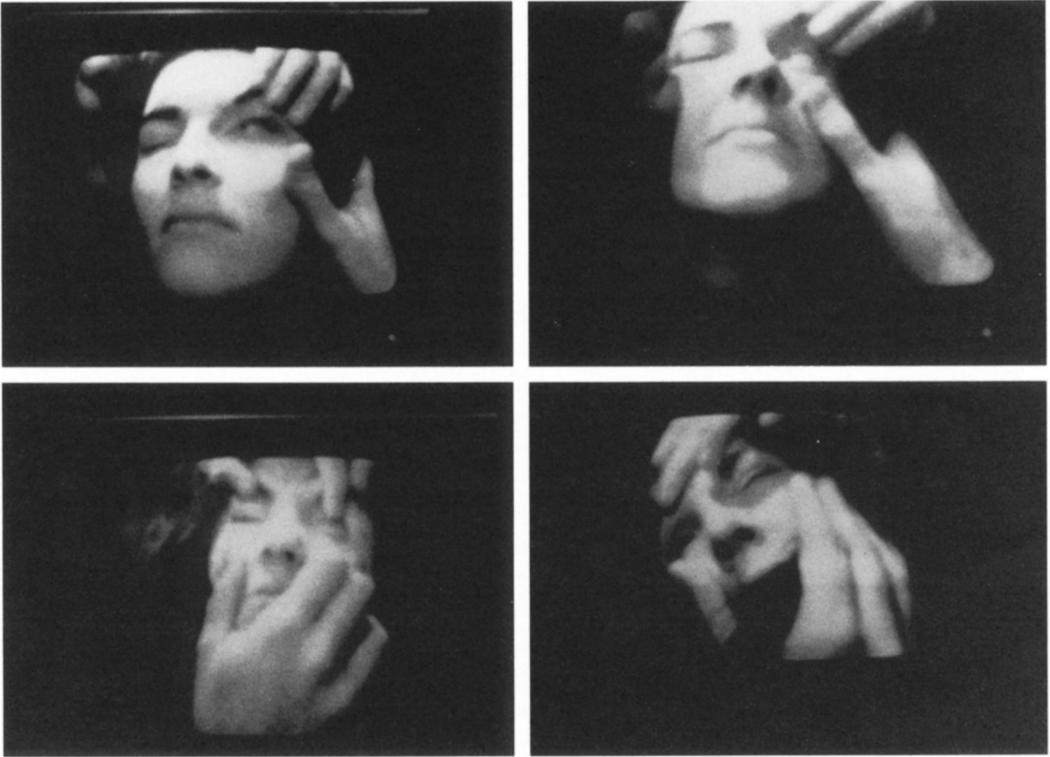
Think Nixon confession, or even Clinton disclaimer, and the point seems obvious enough.) Locked in at the head (or foot) of the table, the viewer plays *you* to Acconci's *I. You* as screen and filter and backdrop; you as authenticating membrane for the artist's shifting claims for self. *You* as embarrassed witness to a man apparently exposing the utter one-sidedness of his erotic life. Will your mere presence absolve this sorry subject, or are you there to condemn his insufficiencies? What are you to *do* with this artist's needs and fantasies? Might your role itself stem less from *his* need and fantasy than your own? Are you accuser or accused? Investigator or voyeur? What, we may well end up asking, do *we* want to believe; are we Acconci's double, able to admit to our various motives? Or are we merely his dupe?<sup>25</sup>

18. I am pinning this particular set of questions on Vito Acconci. His aggressive address to the newly tense intersection between artist, work, and viewer makes it easy to do. The tension mostly lies, I think, in the discrepancies between what the viewer sees and feels, and what she can be sure she knows. But Acconci is not alone. Go back to Laurie Anderson, with her candid camera and documentary photographs. *Is this candor, or is it duplicity? Whose ends are served by the white erasing masks she assigns to the men who accosted her? Who exactly is protected by her obliteration of the "male gaze"? Does she not risk increasing its mysterious power, simply by working so hard at hiding it away? Without that effort, would we be looking at all-too-vivid evidence of masculine insufficiency? Or turn once more to Joan Jonas in 1970, again performing with a mirror: she stands naked before her audience, yet proceeds to inspect her body's reflection, an image which no one else can see. *Mirror Check* is this piece's title.<sup>26</sup> A technician seems to speak through it—think of "sound check" as an immediate parallel—but here the naked Jonas plays the technician's role herself. The mechanics she is testing involve vision, not volume: her exhibitionist's posture and narcissist's gesture paradoxically suggest that there are still private and public disclosures, private and public opportunities and limits for intimate sight.*

19. What are we to do with these artists' needs and fantasies and aggressions? Pass judgment? Gather the evidence of their contradictions and failures and betrayals, their sexism and confession and aggression and bathos, and on that basis absolve or, more likely, condemn? Do we need to believe that performance and video, in all their apparent narcissism and self-absorption, make themselves

25. *Command Performance*, 1974, a mixed video installation in which the viewer takes a place in a spotlit chair on which the camera is trained, stands as the summa of Acconci's manipulations of the viewer's consciousness of being present via a mediated real.

26. *Joan Jonas*, p. 19.



Acconci. *Pryings*. 1971. Performance with video, performed with Kathy Dillon.

parenthetical to some vital or relevant history of contemporary art? Not if we recognize how much at this particular moment of its history video and performance art is bound up in describing the technological effects of contemporaneity as simultaneously alienating and intimate, and how much aesthetic expectations are themselves refigured by such technological terms of address. In other words: I think we should read video and performance as metaphors aiming to stage, and thus instance, this key historical circumstance—and predicament—of contemporary art. Their self-absorption (what Krauss called narcissism) is conjoined with an especially aggressive—we can rightly say coercive—posture toward the viewer, by which a new awareness and mode of vision might be urged. (Perhaps an artist needs narcissism to get aggression across.) And the very aggression of this posture makes of these artists the negative figure of the viewer's bored or quailing stance before their work.

Look, for one final instance, at Vito Acconci in his 1972 *Pryings*, trying desperately, ineffectively, to force open his collaborator's eyes. We can almost hear him saying, "If only I could make her see." Yes, *I*. And also *her*: of course the coercive double-standard of gender seems to be restaged in this performance as a "battle between the sexes"; yet, unable to alter his partner's willed blindness, Acconci is the one who fails. He fails to make her a viewer, that is. In video and performance, such abortive efforts at connection, whether with the self or another

person, between men and women, between artist and viewer, are launched again and again. It is worth emphasizing that both men and women participate in such efforts and that they often do so in ways that twin polemic with allegory: in such cases we are rarely dealing with “the artist’s self.”

20. What, finally, *are* the dictates at issue here? That “the arts need witnesses,” certainly. But those witnesses now need some restructuring; they must be made to see anew. To see actively, to see critically, to see suspiciously. To see themselves doubled, maybe duped, by the artist who is the object of their gaze. To see art’s emotions and confessions as at best a form of burlesque. To see that art’s summoning of selfhood is compromised by what we might call a “media effect.” Media, in fact, can keep the gears of selfhood from being able to engage. These forms of seeing are sometimes ridiculous, sometimes unpleasant, sometimes boring, with all three effects to some extent the result of the ambivalent suspicion voiced in both performance and video around 1970, that the viewer might not be there after all. She’s home, glued to the TV. And why not? Any guarantees of pleasure, whether bodily or artistic, or offers of entertainment, whether passive or voyeuristic, have sunk in these works to something of an all-time low. Yet such denials are conceived as necessary refusals, however masochistic that might sound: rejected are the public pleasures of television, which, like the offers of advertising, center on illusions of presence, intimacy, and belonging.<sup>27</sup> Now we know why Gary Hill calls video, with thanks to Robert Smithson, “the non-site of t.v.”<sup>28</sup> Television, in other words, is the site—vast, unmapped, unedited—that video and its attendant mediated performances picture and articulate by negative reversal, as a broken piece of an absent whole. Does this mean that when these new media begin to offer pleasure and entertainment their critical dimension is lost? This is a question we might reasonably put to Bill Viola, as to any other practitioner of video and performance in the present day. For what is missing from Viola’s spectacular meditations on life and death and transience is any built-in mistrust of his medium. Nor does irony bracket his message. Instead his work insists—sometimes to the point of coercion and against the grain of his predecessors’ sheer reluctance and skepticism—that we believe in the magnitude and meaningfulness of what camera and artist give us to see.

27. Judith Williamson in *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertisements* (London: Boyars, 1979) offers a useful analysis of how advertising works.

28. Gary Hill, “And If the Right Hand Did Not Know What the Left Hand Is Doing,” *Illuminating Video*, p. 97.