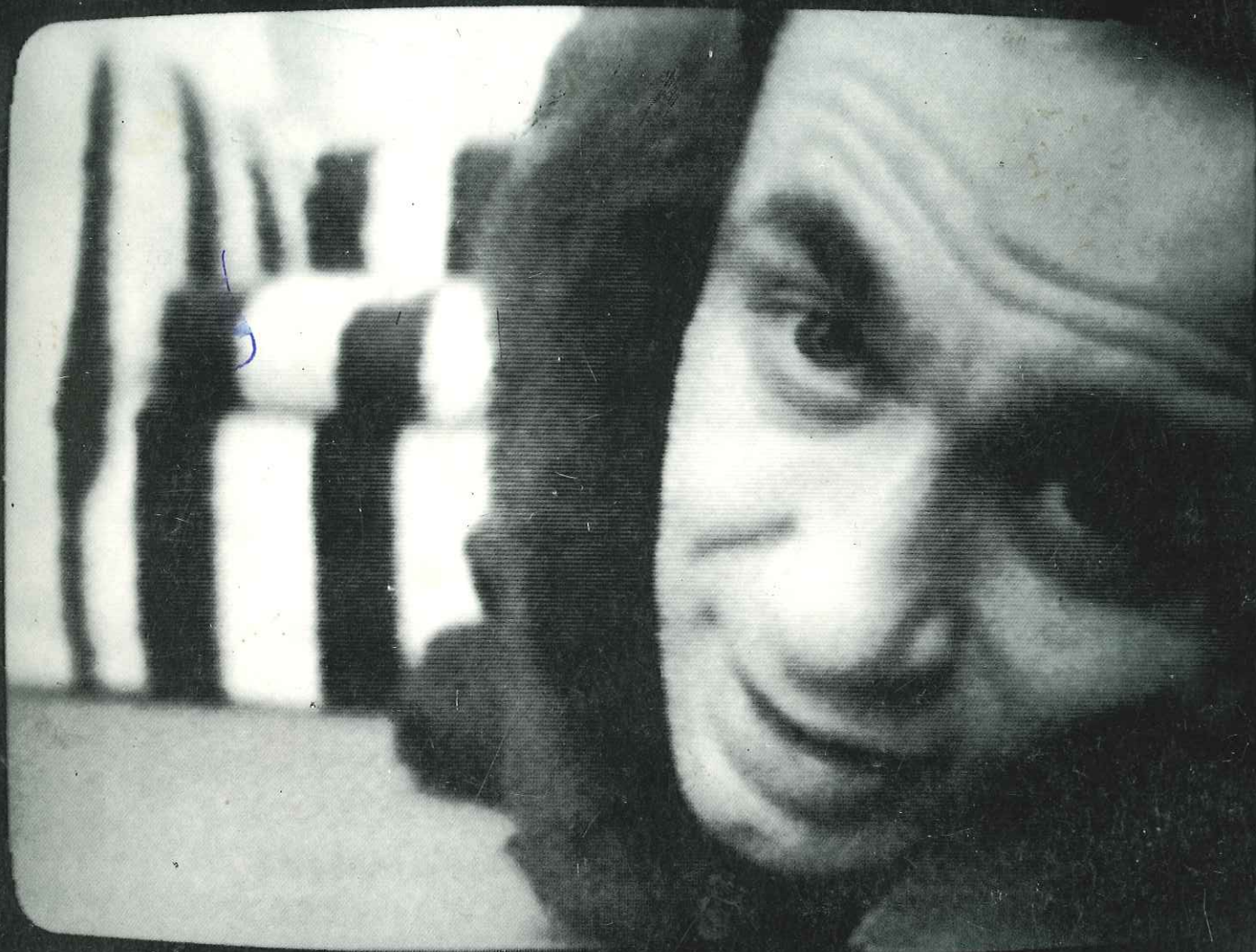# Acting Out

The Body In Video: Then and Now

Acting Out

The Body In Video: Then and Now

Henry Moore Gallery
Royal College of Art

22 February – 13 March 1994

Curated by:

Julia Bunnage
Clarrie Rudrum
Annushka Shani
Alessandro Vincentelli
Victoria Walsh

Bruce Nauman
'Lip Sync', 1969.
Photo: VIdeo Data Bank Chicago.

Video: Process and Duration[1]

Liz Kotz

In his 1973 videotape *Theme Song*, Vito Acconci lies cosily on the living room floor, his head nearly filling the monitor. He is talking to us, inviting us to come join him: 'I need somebody. I just need a body next to me. Come in here, I'll wrap around you. You need it as much as I do, we both need it . . . My body's here, your body could be here.' And so on, for the 33 minutes of the tape, as he accompanies his monologue with songs of the Doors, Bob Dylan, Van Morrison and others, noisily flipping the tapes in and out.

This perversely intimate address spins a web in which any viewer can be the 'you' Acconci implores to join him, the 'you' who will complete his longings: 'How long do I have to wait for you?' Like other tapes Acconci made in 1973, in *Theme Song* Acconci directly addresses the viewer in an intense one-to-one relationship. This pared down 'I/you' artist/viewer dyad replaces the earlier 'he/she' dyad structuring works like *Pryings*, *Pull*, and *Remote Control* (all 1971), in which Acconci records the intensity of his relationship with the woman who performs with him. No longer do we just watch two performers engaging in a struggle for love and recognition; Acconci now makes us part of that battle, addresses us with that demand. In so doing, Acconci's *Theme Song* represents a wider strategy in performance-based video and film, one that 'Acting Out' explores: the use of process, duration and repetition to create a relationship to the viewer, one in which positions of subject and object are often far from stable.

From the earliest works by Acconci, Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman, artists have used time-based media to probe the relationship between viewer and image. Taking their cue from the use of scale and 'theatricality' in Minimalist art,[2] early work in video (and structural film, as well) created performative situations which forced the viewer not only to respond to the work, but also, as in Acconci's perpetually frustrated seduction, to 'complete' it as well.[3] As Acconci notes, 'the performer's space is incomplete, it needs the viewer as part of the performance area – the performer's stance on screen, his moves, are caused by the viewer's position as strategic agent in interaction with him.'[4] Yet as Acconci's tapes make so clear, it is a desire enacted in fantasy, a desire struc-

tured, as it were, by the inevitability of its own failure: for 'you' can never be there, inside the monitor with Acconci, but must always remain on the outside looking in, identifying with Acconci and with the shifter 'you', endlessly interpellated by the flow of seducing words and images, and just as endlessly rebuffed by them.

Recently video has made a striking return to the gallery setting. And it has done so, not in the form of the glib media critiques of 'postmodernist' art, nor the increasingly televisual sensibility of 'independent' film and video, but predominantly through a return to the work of the late 60s and early 70s: a return to process-based, task-like structures and durational work – in short, to those strategies that led so many 70s commentators to condemn video art as 'boring'. Like any taking-up of the forms of the past, this is a return with a difference, inflecting these forms with an array of apparently 'new' contents: mass media artifacts, institutional uses of video such as medical and legal documentation, markedly pop sensibilities, and explicit political concerns, especially those of sexuality and gender. Part of a wider reinvestigation of Minimalist and Postminimalist practices, these videomakers' concerns with the formal properties of the medium are not new, but they come to us filtered through the interventions of home video technology and its impact on popular culture.

Yet even a cursory glance at the videos from the late 60s and early 70s reveals that these concerns were, to an extent, already embedded in the early work, even if critical discourses surrounding such work routinely suppressed discussion of its content and associations in order to focus on purely formal perceptual issues. Acconci's *Theme Song*, after all, is a one-to-one encounter framed by period pop hits, in which the slightly shopworn appeal of Acconci's seductions is doubled in the deeply cliched, yet perhaps still moving, selection of songs. It is this tension – knowing the cliche of the device, yet being moved by it nonetheless, knowing that the 'you' is impersonal, yet taking it personally – that gives *Theme Song* its humour and bite, undiminished after all these years. Likewise, Acconci's *Face of the Earth* (1974) is both a sonorous cocoon that envelops its audience, and an obsessive retelling of American frontier mythology.

Predating Acconci's work by a few years, Bruce Nauman's early videos integrate perceptual concerns with an emotionally and politically charged awareness of the life of the body. This conjuncture was not lost on critics of the time. As

Marcia Tucker wrote in *Artforum* in 1970, 'Nauman does not represent or interpret phenomena, such as sound, light, movement, or temperature, but uses them as the basic material of his new work. Our responses to the situations he sets up are not purely physical, however.'[5] Nauman's time-based works frequently involved the carrying out of an action under a particular set of conditions, recording how long it took to play out. Most were solo performances by Nauman, who recorded them on video or film since he lacked a venue to present them before an audience,[6] and almost all involve permutations and transformations of the human body. For instance, in *Slow Angle Walk* (1968), Nauman walks stiffly around his studio, carrying out an exercise in balance; in *Bouncing Two Balls between the Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythms* (1968), he bounces two balls, which eventually get out of his control; and in *Manipulating a Fluorescent Tube* (1969), he explores the variations of lighting and shape made possible by moving a glowing tube around his body.

While open to the operations of chance and human fatigue, the actions are not random but highly rehearsed. Inspired by Merce Cunningham's transformations of everyday activities into dance, and the Judson Church dancers' experiments with task structures and repetition, Nauman investigated the permeable line between movement, exercise, practice and performance.[7] In *Lip Sync* (1969), he presents an ongoing repetitive action that allows the viewer to come and go, an activity apparently without a beginning or end. The camera is upside-down, focused on Nauman's mouth, chin and throat, as he repeats the title words, articulating them in an exaggerated manner; while at the same time, he listens to himself through headphones. The lips and words go in and out of sync throughout. The tape, an hour-long performance of this simple repeated gesture, becomes an exercise in endurance, almost an ordeal.

In *Flesh to White to Black to Flesh* (1969), Nauman, seated, carefully applies white make-up to his upper body, followed by the application of black make-up, and then its removal. The action is performed in its actual duration; it takes surprising effort and time to get all the stuff off. Within the structure of the simple, pared-down action, the work concretely explores visual self-transformation and also, metaphorically, race. Like Nauman's corridor pieces, which position the viewer as the performer in a highly-structured sculptural environment, *Flesh to White to Black to Flesh* works on the body to get access to that which is psycho-

logical, cultural and social. Going through such activities, according to Nauman, permits an experiential kind of knowledge not available from mere observation or contemplation: 'An awareness of yourself comes from a certain amount of activity and you can't get it from just thinking about yourself. You do exercises, you have certain kinds of awarenesses that you don't have if you read books.'[8]

Unlike Acconci's relentless monologues, Nauman's address to his audience, whether speaking, as in *Lip Sync*, or silent, as in *Flesh to White to Black to Flesh*, is not primarily verbal, but physical. Through his use of endurance and real time – the actual time it takes to perform the actual action – Nauman performs a transfer onto the body of the viewer: through duration, you live through the experience with him, you in a sense 'become' him.[9] This symbiotic function of duration is of course not absent from Acconci's work; in tapes like *Claim Excerpts* (1971), the torrent of words becomes a feat of endurance for performer and listener alike.[10] Yet Acconci and Nauman represent opposite poles in a sense, one interactive and demanding, the other self-contained and cerebral – opposite poles of masculine subjectivity, perhaps.[11]

In Nauman's work, this trajectory leads to the increasing use of surrogates. In 1969, he ceased performing, substituting detailed instructions which could be carried out by others. Returning to video in *Good Boy, Bad Boy* (1985), the two actors – a younger black man and an older white woman – stand in for Nauman, endlessly rehearsing a series of lines: 'I was a good boy, you were a good boy, we were good boys, this is good . . .' Unlike Acconci, Nauman's use of shifters never stabilises around a relatively stable 'I/you' pair or performs a direct call on the viewer. Instead, he employs highly-formalized procedures, adopting an utterance and subjecting it to a constant series of permutations, to dislodge linguistic structures from the register of the personal. In *Good Boy, Bad Boy*, the un-synced looping of the two cycles pushes this sense of distanciation towards musicality, drawing on the composer Steve Reich's experiments in taking sounds and rhythmic structures in and out of synchronization.[12]

The structures of duration, process and repetition that Acconci and Nauman exploit occur throughout video of the early 1970s. In many cases, this resulted from technical limitations: without access to a TV studio, editing was nearly impossible, and many early videos simply run the length of the tape. Yet filmic analogues to these early process works, such as Richard Serra's *Hand Catching*

Lead (1968), a three-minute film of a simple action repeated without internal editing, suggest that more is at stake. It also demonstrates that the psychological states induced by duration – in this case, heightened anticipation, frustration and concentration – don't require a long work, but a certain controlled use of temporal structures. As David Antin notes in his famous essay 'Video: Some Distinctive Features of the Medium,' discussing Robert Morris' *Exchange* (1973) and John Baldessari's *Some Words I Mispronounce* (1971), what these artists shared was an 'attitude toward time': 'The work ends whenever its intention is accomplished. The time is inherent time, the time required for the task at hand.'.[13]

Rejecting the absolute control of materials embodied in classic Minimalism, these artists share a postminimalist decision to let the seams show. Their strict use of inherent time needs to be distinguished both from documentary films which use fragments of real time to connote immediacy or facticity, and from more recent works of performance-video, such as those of Matthew Barney, in which the artist takes excerpts from his own durational performances to give viewers a 'feel' of the original without actually subjecting them to it. While many of the younger artists in this exhibition use their own bodies as material, they depart strikingly from the process-based, durational or repetitive structures of early video art, or adapt them to a contemporary sensibility informed by televisual time and MTV.

Indeed, a unifying characteristic of the contemporary videos in 'Acting Out' is their temporal compression. In Barney's *The Jim OTTO Suite: – OTTOblow – AUTOblow* (1991), two edited sequences loop at short intervals, accompanied in the installation by a football jersey and hydraulic jack 'performance documents'. In the tapes, Barney presents clips of highly suggestive actions, probing the professionalised male masochism of football. In linked works, like his *Field Dressing* and *MILE HIGH Threshold* (1991), Barney records an arduous exercise of crawling across a gallery ceiling naked, a vaguely sadomasochistic performance complete with ice screws and a variety of straps and harnesses that seem to entrap as much as aid him. In another sequence, Barney sheaths his heavily muscled body in an elegant evening dress and heels, performing a kind of drag. Yet as viewers, we are not privy to his act of transformation; it is a surface, a spectacle we view at a distance, but not a ritual that we undergo with him.

Barney's videos exist less as independent art works than as documents that illuminate the twisted permutations on athletic equipment, such as a refrigerated incline bench made out of vaseline, assorted floor mats and protective pads, left after the performance is over. Internally edited, and using video effects such as slow motion, Barney's tapes suggest a performance of self, and an unbridgeable subject-object relation, utterly different from the videos of Acconci, Nauman, and other early 70s practitioners. The body of the artist is transformed by the intense ordeals of weight-training and the actual performance; yet the viewer receives this not as a process but as an image. Barney's performance is, as one critic notes, a body stitched together out of the remnants of the past, 'body art' resurrected as a cadaver.[14]

In Cheryl Donegan's short, quirky process-based videos *Head*, *Make Dream*, and *Bodytype* (all 1993), the artist enacts a simple gesture charged with both art historical and erotic overtones. In *Head*, Donegan approaches a green plastic bottle sitting on a table; she unplugs its spout, and a stream of milk squirts out. To the accompaniment of loud rock music, she variously slurps up the liquid, spews it back into the bottle, or spits it onto the wall – a playful reference to the splashes and spills of Abstract Expressionist style gesture painting – until the bottle is empty, a thin trickle oozing down its side.[15] In *MakeDream*, she performs a difficult ritual, rhythmically hoisting a paint tube with only her legs and hips, to make wild, gestural streaks and splashes of blue paint onto the walls of her tiny arena.

Like Nauman, Donegan never edits a tape, but rigorously practises or repeats an action until she is satisfied with the outcome; and as with Barney's tapes, we are constantly conscious of the artist's body, both as a vehicle of effort and skill, and as a spectacle. Both *Head* and *MakeDream* are quite short: about three minutes, pop song length. In each a repetitive action in a sense comprises a whole: Donegan keeps going until the fluid runs out, yet the temporal frame is provided as much by the pop song as the action. It was in her first video, *Gag* (1991), that Donegan explored a more strictly task-based structure; the artist sits in a black and chrome chair, her arms tied behind her, a long loaf of French bread stuck provocatively between her thighs. The tape consists of Donegan slowly eating the bread, until her head is in her lap. The completed action takes

about nine minutes, and the only sounds are those Donegan makes while labori-
ously chewing the loaf, until only a stub is left.

Donegan's move towards pop songs to provide a temporal frame mirrors that
of Lindell in *Put Your Lips Around Yes* which re-reads Michael Snow's text film
So is This (1982), infusing structural form with pop and libidinal content – as the
raunchy titles of gay porn videos surge and mutate to the music of 'My Bloody
Valentine'. Both Donegan and Lindell subsume a Minimalist strategy (the
process piece, the film as text) to a pop format.[16] In Barney's tapes, which do not
feature sound, the pop analogues are fashion and sports. This turn towards
image is perhaps most forcefully exploited in Pierrick Sorin's auto-erotic perfor-
mance *C'est Mignon Tout Ça*, a single-monitor installation in which the artist,
alternately dressed as male and female, 'watches' himself being touched and
aroused. Enacting a mechanized mediation of the body, Barney, Donegan and
Sorin all perform durational rituals, but don't subject us to them; they do it for
us, replacing an experiential notion of process with one more based in spectacle.

Yet this move towards temporal compression is not the only possible
response to the time-based work of the late 60s and early 70s. Some contempo-
rary artists continue to work with duration and repetition in a somewhat excru-
ciating manner, a strategy which, even after decades of familiarity, still disturbs
and alienates. Works such as Leslie Singer's 40-minute performance monologue
Hot Rox (1988), Lutz Bacher's six-hour video installation, *Huge Uterus* (1989),
featuring standard medical videotapes of the artist's own uterine surgery, push
duration to a point where it is annoying, repulsive, and deeply destabilizing[17] –
as do Paul McCarthy's often extremely disturbing performance-based videos
from the early 70s and his more recent works *Bossy Burger* (1991) and *Heidi*
(1992, with Mike Kelly).

Likewise, Karen Kilimnik's videos of the past two years, comprised of obses-
sively repeated sequences from cult TV shows (*The Avengers*) and films (*Ciao
Manhattan* and *Heathers*) appear genuinely strange and pathological. Forming a
bridge to 1970s work via 'scatter art' and the use of degraded materials,
Kilimnik's tapes combine pop sources and degraded, almost decomposed struc-
tures: disassembling their borrowed text, they leave it in pieces. This kind of
defusive repetition resembles that of Bacher's video sculpture *My Penis* (1992),
in which the short phrase of trial defendant William Kennedy Smith, 'I, uh, had

my penis', is looped incessantly, causing its shifters to lose their anchor and pro-liferate in meaning.

Like Nauman's *Good Boy, Bad Boy* and Lindell's *Put Your Lips Around Yes*, Kilimnik's videos and Bacher's *My Penis* involve surrogates. Unlike strategies of process, duration and performance based in the body of the artist, this use of surrogates does something very different: it moves them back towards the mass media, representation, and linguistic structures. Working at the outset with an image of another, these chains of substitutions produce the incessant subject/object inverting characteristic of earlier body art; just as we 'become' Nauman while watching *Flesh to White to Black to Flesh*, William Kennedy Smith in a sense 'becomes' Bacher 'becomes' us. By bringing this sense of subject/object interpenetration to the mass media image, Bacher and Kilimnik preserve the instability of these identifications, allowing them to integrate the criticality of 1980s postmodernism and move beyond it. Yet this use of surrogacy goes back at least to Acconci, both in terms of the woman who performs in the box in *Remote Control* and the pop songs played in *Theme Song*.

Whether moving towards spectacle or towards its collapse, these works by younger artists share a common ground. Largely coming from outside the field of independent film and video, they have taken up time-based media to explore certain crucial question in contemporary art. In a sense, this work may represent a trajectory in video parallel to what happened in photography during the 1980s, in which visual artists with no proper training in photography adopted it to work through certain issues in postmodernist art, using easily accessible com-mercial technologies. Working with a do-it-yourself, anti-specialist logic, what unites all these artists now working in video is precisely the history each traces to the artist-made videos of the late 60s and early 70s, however differently they read, interpret and reactivate that history.

Notes

2   This notion of Minimal sculpture's 'theatricality,' due to the manner in which its scale interacts with the viewer's body, was initially formulated by Minimalism's critic, Michael Fried, in 'Art and Objecthood,' *Artforum*, June, 1967, reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968). The concept was subsequently taken up by supporters of Minimal art; see, for instance, Rosalind Krauss, 'The Double Negative,' in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977) and Hal Foster, 'The Crux of Minimalism,' in Howard Singerman, ed., *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art*, 1945–1986 (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art/Abbeville Press, 1986).

3   Acconci's notion of video as an intimate one-to-one encounter or a 'home companion' is outlined in a number of his essays, including 'Some Notes on Video as a Base (1974),' in Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons, eds., *The New Television: A Public/Private Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978); '10-Point Plan for Video,' Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot, eds., *Video Art: An Anthology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976); and 'Television, Furniture and Sculpture: The Room with an American View,' *The Luminous Image* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1984) reprinted in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds., *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture/San Francisco: Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990). For early readings of both Acconci and Nauman, see Rosalind Krauss, 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,' *October* vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring, 1976) and David Ross, 'A Provisional Overview of Artists' Television in the U.S.,' *Studio International*, vol. 191, no. 981 (May–June, 1976), both reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978).

4   Vito Acconci, 'Some Notes on Video as a Base,' *The New Television*, p. 82.

5   Marcia Tucker, 'PheNAUMANology,' originally published in *Artforum*, December, 1970; reprinted in Richard Armstrong and Richard Marshall, eds., *The New Sculpture 1965–75: Between Geometry and Gesture* (Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), p. 209.

6   See Coosje van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), p. 228.

7   For the Judson dancers' use of task structures and repetition, see Yvonne Rainer, *Works 1961–73* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974) and Sally Banes, *Terpischore in Sneakers: Postmodern Dance* (Wesleyan University Press, 1987).

8   Bruce Nauman, from Willoughby Sharp, 'Bruce Nauman,' originally published in *Avalanche*, 1971, republished in *The New Sculpture 1965–75*, p. 240.

9   As Nauman notes in his interview with Sharp, the durational aspect of the performance, along with the concentration of the performer, is crucial for creating a sense of physical sympathy in the viewer: 'If you really believe in what you're doing and do it as well as you can, then there will be a certain amount of tension – if you are honestly tired, or if you are honestly trying to balance on one foot for a long time, there has to be a certain sympathetic response in someone who is watching you. It is a kind of body response, they feel that foot and that tension'. (p. 241).

10 For a psychoanalytic exploration of Acconci's 'three-hour domination of the field of language' in *Claim* (1971), see Kathy O'Dell, 'Performance, Video and Trouble in the Home,' in *Illuminating Video*, in which O'Dell traces the introduction of video into performance in the early 1970s, and the crucial role this had in interrupting cultural concepts of the performing body as whole and immediate. Focusing on 'this moment of self-regard' identified by Rosalind Krauss in 'Video: the Aesthetics of Narcissism,' O'Dell proposes to 'observe how it operates for the viewing subject and the subject viewed,' arguing that 'As video became available as a medium, artists in the early 1970s were literally equipped to stand before the mirror of representation and confront physical identity as psychical, fragmentary and metaphoric'. (p. 150).

11 Both modes can be seen in Adrian Piper's video installations, which combine Acconci's imploring 'I/you' dialogue structures with a Nauman-like self-contained cerebrality, particularly in *Cornered* (1989) and *What It's Like, What It Is, No. 3* (1991).

12 For a discussion of Nauman's relation to Reich, see Coosje van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman*, p.68. Nauman's trajectory towards surrogate figures, the head, and more representational/linguistic structures paradoxically leads to the use of his own image in *Raw Material – 'MMMM'* (1990), a room-installation of four giant projected images of Nauman's rather dishevelled head, spinning and upside-down, changing colours garishly, while groaning or murmuring. The piece goes on and on, using duration and scale to put the view 'inside' Nauman's head, inducing a state of nausea that represents either a hangover or an entry into the post/pre-linguistic, and pushing Nauman's work closer to the viscerality of Paul McCarthy.

13 See David Antin, 'Video: the Distinctive Features of the Medium', originally published in Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot, *Video Art: An Anthology*; reprinted in John Hanhardt, ed., *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation* (Visual Studies Workshop Books, 1986), p. 155.

14 Lane Relyea, 'Openings: Matthew Barney', *Artforum*, September, 1991, p. 124. See also Jerry Saltz, 'Notes on a Sculpture', *Arts Magazine*, May, 1991, and Roberta Smith, 'Matthew Barney's Objects and Actions', *The New York Times*, Friday, October 25, 1991, p. C28.

15 For a reading of *Head* as exploring female pleasure, see Collier Schorr, 'Openings: Cheryl Donegan', *Artforum*, Summer, 1993, p. 96.

16 In so doing, they are not unlike the short video art tapes of Sadie Benning, which reprise the formal strategies of 1960s and 70s experimental film (the generation of her father, James Benning), compressing them to pop song length, with pop music soundtracks.

17 For readings of Bacher's video work, see my 'Sex with Strangers,' *Artforum*, September, 1992, and 'Lutz Bacher's Excruciating Intimacy,' forthcoming in *Balcon* no. 11.