



Phil Collins **the world won't listen**

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Live Through This

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Over thirty years ago, the art historian Rosalind Krauss famously diagnosed the then-new medium of video art as structured by an "aesthetics of narcissism." Viewing artists' tapes of the early 1970s by Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, and Lynda Benglis, among others, Krauss focused on the insistent moments of self-mirroring and self-regard in these works, to propose that the medium of video art was "the psychological condition of the self split and doubled by the mirror-reflection of synchronous feedback."¹

Krauss's essay has been criticized for its seeming antipathy to video art, but its fundamental insights are still sound. They alert us to the ways that the very infrastructure or structuring principles of moving-image media consist not merely of the physical, material apparatus – the stuff of camera, monitor, screen, pixels, and so on – but the peculiar personal and psychological relations that these technologies become embedded in and help generate. For well over a century now, the creation of selves and the production of images, moving and still, have existed in a strange symbiosis. Many of the most compelling psychoanalytic models have come to focus on the displaced moments of self-mirroring that occur when we look at images and on all the strange interplays of love and aggression, envy and desire that occur when we see ourselves in the image of another and see another in ourselves.

Even more than photography, the durational nature of film and video allows on-camera subjects to expose themselves in ways that provoke an unstable transference between viewer and viewed. Since the 1970s, the closed-circuit and self-referential systems that Krauss saw as pointing to an incessant and self-enclosed now have been partly supplanted by projects that use found and recorded materials to probe structures of cinematic and televisual viewing. Each mutating setup, from closed-circuit monitor to handheld gadget to large-scale projection, potentially creates vastly different ways of addressing, engaging, and involving a viewer. These differences – in scale, in the bodily position and activity of the viewer – generate a nuanced array of phenomenological, experienced and spectatorial effects, yet our deeply rooted capacities to involve ourselves in a face or a story migrate surprisingly well from platform to platform.

Over the past several years, Phil Collins's work in video has investigated the complex, unpredictable, and often fraught relationships among those who watch, shoot, and appear on video and TV. Although positioned within the art world, Collins's project has emerged from the margins of recent visual art practice. Since the 1990s, countless artists have pushed the medium toward spectacular and pictorial uses that divorce it from its roots in amateur video and TV – often adopting video technology to contrive quasi-cinematic narratives or create giant luminous tableaux that decorate buildings.² In the artfully constructed world of high-end gallery-based video, irruptions of the real are rare; almost no one talks.



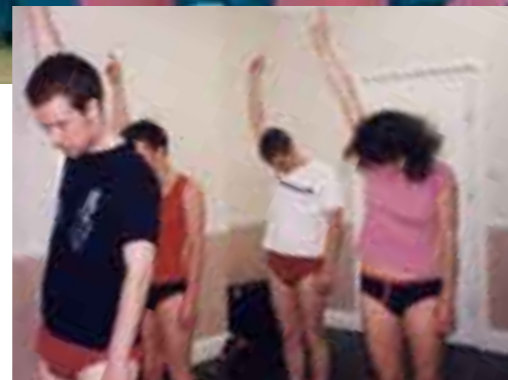
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Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October*, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 55.



Photo by Peter Moore

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See my essay, "Video Projection: The Space Between Screens," in *Contemporary Art in Theory*, ed. Simon Leung and Zoya Kocur (London: Basil Blackwell, 2004); reprinted in Tanya Leighton, ed., *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader* (London: Afterall/Tate Publishing, 2007).

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In, for example, *hero* (2002), which records the drunken reminiscences of a journalist who witnessed the 9/11 World Trade Center collapse, and *gercegin geri donusu* (2005), which features the stories of people who "felt their lives had been ruined" by appearing on reality TV.

Collins's work insistently pushes back, into the psychic entrapment, confessional moments, and the troubling power relations occasioned by vernacular uses of video. In it, people do sing and also talk and tell stories.³ Part of the reason video so often fails as a device for self-mirroring is that many of us don't feel comfortable with what we see on the monitor — the selves that appear from without are not always ones we recognize, much less identify with. Collins's videos explore the danger and awkwardness of such exposure. Yet from within the violence of representation, he nonetheless extracts moments of extraordinary beauty, even ecstatic bliss. And even if a number of his tapes are shot in adamantly low-fi, improvised conditions, his gallery presentations are often seamless and highly crafted, self-consciously aware of the validation and drama that media presentation accords everyday life.

As his oddly awkward photographs suggest, Collins isn't interested in making pretty pictures. Instead, his turn to video seems to have begun with pain. The artist has discussed how he came to make his first video, *how to make a refugee* (1999), while recording photo shoots by journalists working in a Kosovar refugee camp across the border in Macedonia. In *how to make a refugee*, we look on as a crew of British photojournalists pose and photograph a Kosovar family, focusing on a petulant, bored-looking fifteen-year-old boy. In one charged moment, he is asked to raise his undershirt to reveal a long scar across his stomach; in another, the extended family is arranged on the couch as in an ersatz portrait session. As crew members chatter mindlessly in the background and issue terse



how to make a refugee, 1999

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"Who Said an Artwork Shouldn't Be an Imposition? A Conversation between Phil Collins and Jeremy Millar," in *Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2006*, ed. Stefanie Braun (London: Photographers' Gallery, 2006), 77.

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Claire Bishop and Francesco Manacorda, "The Producer as Artist," in *yeah you, baby you*, ed. Siniša Mitrović (Milton Keynes and Hove, England: Milton Keynes Gallery and Shady Lane Publications, 2005), 24.



baghdad screentests, 2002

commands, the scene takes on a casual brutality. Commenting on the experience, Collins recalls that there was "something very ugly and brutal about the total disregard for the subject, and a complete lack of understanding of the reasons why he won't expose his wounds. . . ."4

For us, in watching *how to make a refugee*, this discomfort is replicated. The tape is a document of a chance encounter between Collins and routine practices of photojournalism in war-torn locales. It's like a shard, a found object. The tape starts abruptly and cuts off abruptly; its eleven minutes contain enough garbled dialogue, blocked views, and off-kilter shots to strain the patience of a Warhol fan. Yet it contains seeds of Collins's subsequent work in video — from the intense fascination with the interior performances that distressed subjects provide for the camera to the artificial backdrops and incongruous props that emphasize the sense of placelessness. Although his videos are often shot in intense, conflict-ridden places — Baghdad, Bogotá, Ramallah, among others — Collins's shooting style deliberately dislocates us, in ways that obliterate any direct reference to their immediate circumstances.

Clad in a dark blue T-shirt and baseball cap, the boy who is the main subject of *how to make a refugee* is pretty average looking — at first glance, he could be a skinny kid from anywhere. In watching the tape, our attention lingers on odd props and details—the thin gold chain around the boy's neck, his Western teen attire, and the large bouquet of fake flowers that sits on an end table, partly blocking our view. Against the world-historical register of ethnic conflict and catastrophe, Collins is clearly drawn to these sorts of details and the glimpses they give us of private fantasies and desires. As Claire Bishop and Francesco Manacorda note, Collins's work evidences what may seem to be "a politically-incorrect or frivolous attitude toward his subject-matter." His works avoid direct references to the political situations they nonetheless record, preferring "generic globalized teenagers" to the overtly located subjects of most documentary work. As Bishop and Manacorda suggest, by "voiding the work of direct political narrative,"5 Collins's videos open spaces to be filled by our own fantasies and projections.

Elements that seem to have occurred accidentally in *how to make a refugee* are then explored as strategies in Collins's subsequent works. In *baghdad screentests* (2002), Collins adopts the format and serial structure that Warhol used in his *Screen Tests* (1963–66). In Warhol's films of the mid-1960s, visitors to the Factory were seated in front of a camera mounted on a tripod and were told not to move or blink for the duration of the approximately three-minute-long camera rolls. In Collins's work, the effect is arguably different: shot in video, against a white background, the sequences mostly sidestep the confrontational, testlike quality of Warhol's starkly lit portrait films. Is it the softer focus of the video camera or a different relation between viewer and viewed? Some of the subjects perform for the camera; others just sit there, quite formal, quietly staring. One man restlessly smokes onscreen and appears to talk to the camera. He looks irritated and bored, gives the camera the finger, then starts reading a magazine. If Warhol's



they shoot horses, 2004. Installation view, Neue Kunsthalle, St. Gallen, Switzerland, 2006

would-be stars mostly were held transfixed by the camera, Collins's subjects are far more difficult to read. In the absence of contextual information, we look all the harder for the small signs and details that might allow us to read these faces, to bring them closer to us.

The serial form, presenting one thing after another, is not only a debt to Warhol but also a classic strategy of 1960s minimal art and structural film. Collins's videos tend to employ one of a handful of minimalist devices – task structures, extended durations, serial presentations. Unlike the classic minimal and conceptual projects of the 1960s and 1970s, however, the activities and materials are loosely drawn from popular culture. In some of the videos pop music is firmly integrated into the fabric of the work. Thus the karaoke project compiles an album of performances based on The Smiths' 1987 compilation album, *The World Won't Listen*, and *they shoot horses* (2004) lines two groups of young people against a wall to perform a seven-hour dance marathon to a selection of music from the past three decades.⁶

they shoot horses is Collins's most sculptural work. In it, his involvement with early video and performance art becomes most visible. In his projects of the past several years, Collins has adopted sculptural and performance-based approaches to video, using process, duration, and repetition to create a complex relationship with the viewer, one in which positions of subject and object are usually far from stable. Taking its cue from the use of scale and "theatricality" in minimalist art, early work in video (and structural

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Both groups danced for eight hours, but the work contains only seven hours as one of the hour-long tapes was inexplicably lost in transit at the Israeli border.

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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, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Postmodern Dance* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987).



Yvonne Rainer, 1965

film, as well) created performative situations that forced viewers not only to respond to the work but also, in a sense to "complete" it. Drawing from these models, Collins's videos set up rule-based structures and then see how they play out.

The opening moments of *they shoot horses* are a beautiful transition from stillness to movement, as the two groups of dancers start to move to the rhythm of the song. In each projection, several young people are lined up against a bright pink wall that has two horizontal stripes painted at about head height. The strict spatial arrangement allows permutations and variations to reveal themselves vividly. The dancers are confined to a shallow stage-like set, so their bodies bounce around all the corners of their narrow box much like pictorial elements trapped in a frame. When they are projected nearly life-sized on adjacent walls of the gallery, we encounter these figures in an almost one-to-one bodily relation. As the two groups of dancers keep trying to dance, song after song, hour after hour, their energy flags and then rallies and then flags again. One or two individuals sit out for a while, and then someone gets them going again. We have never met these young people, but after a while we feel as if we know them intimately: the cheerleadery girl with the long earrings and athletic clothes, the tired girl, the handsome aloof guy. As fatigue takes its toll, their efforts appear alternately tragic and comic, heroic and heartbreaking.

This type of task-based performance, recorded on video, inevitably recalls the studio films and videos that Bruce Nauman made in the late 1960s, in which he would perform a simple action for an extended period – for instance, *Bouncing Two Balls between the Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythms* or *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner around the Perimeter of a Square* (both 1967–68). Nauman's actions were not random but highly structured and rehearsed, but over time the execution of these actions became disrupted by the operations of chance and human fatigue. We watch him get tired, get angry, lose focus, and lose control. In Nauman's work the permeable line between everyday movement and choreographed task, between practice and performance, was inspired by Merce Cunningham's transformations of everyday activities into dance and by the Judson Dance Theater's experiments with task structures and repetition.⁷ The discipline with which he carries out these seemingly pointless tasks gives the tapes a black humor and pathos.

Like that of a number of artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Nauman's address to his audience is physical. Through his use of endurance and real time – the actual time it takes to perform the action – he performs a transfer onto the body of the viewer: through duration, one undergoes the experience with him, one, in a sense, becomes him. As Nauman noted in an interview in 1970, 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



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Willoughby Sharp, "Bruce Nauman," *Avalanche, 1971*; republished in *The New Sculpture 1965–75: Between Geometry and Gesture*, ed. Richard Armstrong and Richard Marshall, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), 241, 240.

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The Turner Prize 2006 audio guide, Phil Collins, Audio Guide Transcript, Tate Britain, 2006; http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/2006/philcollins_transcript.htm.

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Phil Collins, "Why Can't I Be You?" in *Now What? Artists Write*, ed. Annie Fletcher, Marija Havlajova, and Mark Kremer (Utrecht: BAK basis voor actuele kunst; Frankfurt: Revolver Archiv für aktuelle Kunst, 2004), 23–26.

sympathetic response in someone who is watching you. It is a kind of body response, they feel that foot and that tension." 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 the early artists who made performance videos, such as Vito Acconci and Nauman, Collins does not perform in his own works (except for a brief appearance at the end of *baghdad screentests*, where he is seen smoking). Instead, his videos operate through a kind of delegated performance as he finds subjects to perform for him — to be his surrogates and ours. His own desire for our attention is triangulated off another subject, who presumably wants his attention — and who is, therefore, willing to do intense things on camera. "I approach the construction of every work from a position of envy," he comments, ". . . this is the thing I wish I could do."⁹ A durational work such as *they shoot horses* makes particular demands on the spectator. As viewers we have to make a commitment to the piece and although watching it is far less demanding than performing in it must be, we don't just observe the dancers' joy and elation, endurance and fatigue, we experience them too.

This triangular structure made up of artist, performer, and audience is quite different from the self-enclosed mirroring that Krauss diagnosed in early video. Watching another, we are constantly pulled into and back out of ourselves. One might try to describe this as an aesthetics of transference or projection: we become Phil become the performers become us. Yet for all their intimacy, the works preserve a distance. Collins speaks of working with an almost romantic ideal: "to offer nothing more, nor less, than the imagined presence of another."¹⁰ The videos almost require us to fall in love with the subjects, to respect and admire their fractured moments of triumph and distress and extreme vulnerability.

These qualities all come together in the trio of The Smiths karaoke videos that Collins has made in the past three years. In *el mundo no escuchará* (2004), filmed in Bogotá, an array of youngish Smiths' fans perform in front of incongruously sunny backdrops of lakeside and tropical leisure. Each backdrop is close enough to the camera that light bounces off it and the performers' shadows fall on it, heightening the artificiality of the scene and making it harder to sink into the nightclub ambiance conjured by the singers' clothes and manners. They try on various rock star poses and gestures, with varying degrees of credibility. The mood changes from song to song and from singer to singer. Many of the performances are not conventionally good, but they are all captivating and even moving. As the singers deliver their songs, they open up private worlds they invite us to enter with them, their courage and exposure making them beautiful.

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"Don't Blow Your Own Horn," in this volume, p. 89.

As Collins describes it: "Other people sometimes find karaoke embarrassing, or laughable, or delusional — the idea that someone gets up and thinks they can sing. But I find it moving and incredibly courageous. As a format, karaoke offers a promise of completion — this act will somehow make me whole — but at the same time it's predicated on the idea of vulnerability and failure, with its countless false starts, its blind terror. The way the pub falls away, and you can clearly see the spot where someone stands. The way they find themselves lost in the middle of a song but unable to escape until it finishes. Its like a mild form of heroism."¹¹

In *dünya dinlemiyor* (2005), shot in Istanbul, the backdrops change more frequently, a parade of sun-kissed mountain vistas and cheery lakeside scenes. Instead of producing any kind of visual recreation of the world of the songs, the video dislocates us, make us feel the enormous gap between the stage set and the performance — a parable of the alienation the lyrics recount. In Collins's serial works, one or two performers appear to be key, seeming to stand for the whole in some indirect way. Toward the end of *dünya dinlemiyor*, a young man wearing a Kafka T-shirt dances throughout the instrumental "Oscillate Wildly." At the very end, a pretty young woman in glittery lipstick and eye shadow works herself into a frenzy during "Rubber Ring," a fervor that outlasts the song, so that the video closes on her face contorted in agony or bliss.

Because of the song's evocative lyrics and the singer's heightened performance, we imagine that we share her feelings: "The passing of time / And all of its crimes / Is making me sad again. / But don't forget the songs / That made you cry / And the songs that saved your life." Collins stages this unabashed belief in the redemptive power of popular culture, in the perverse idea that the music of The Smiths might unearth secret communities of believers in the most far-flung locales. What video allows him to do is to concretize these human subjects into a form of social sculpture; we observe not only gestures and bodies and faces, but also comprehend at least something of the complex social dynamics that underpin them — and us. *they shoot horses* is, after all, a "real time social system," to adopt Hans Haacke's words — even if Collins's approach to political art or institutional critique could not be more different from Haacke's. What Collins has done is to find forms that engage and lay bare the social and psychological relations among subjects and viewers that integrally comprise the medium of video. The very minimalist devices he appropriates have all been understood as strategies to foreground the perceptual and bodily experiences of viewers encountering an object in time and in a specific place. Unlike the strictly phenomenological concerns of minimal art, Collins understands that these encounters are never just in the here and now, but are also located in the very different temporalities of fantasy and projection.