

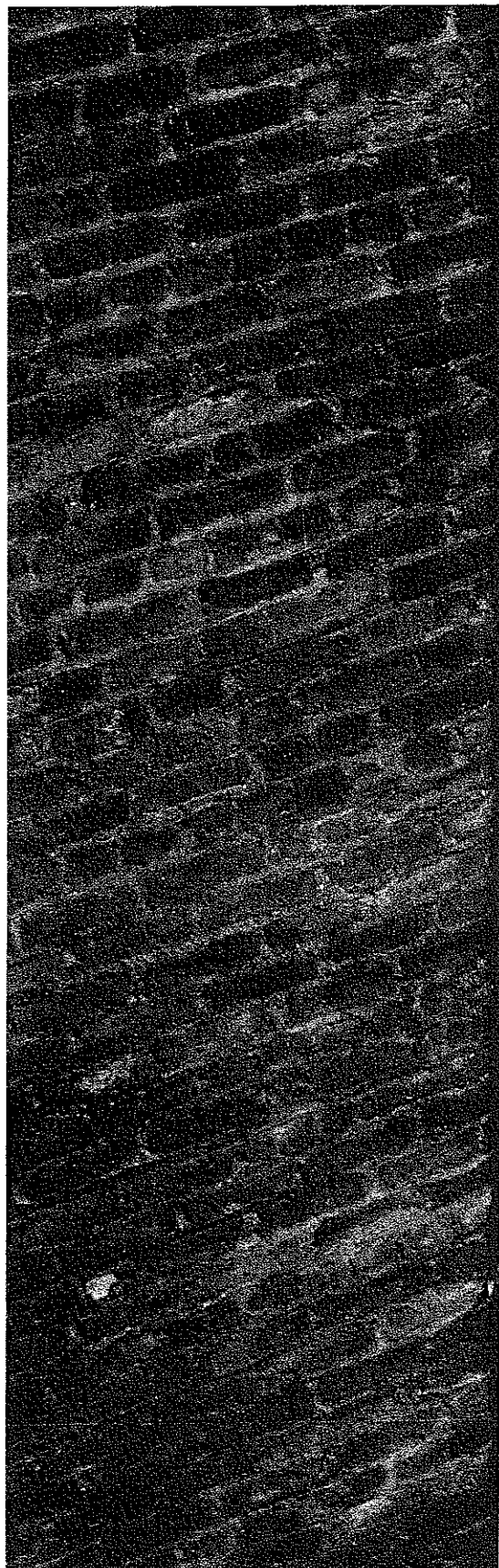
LOUDER THAN WORDS

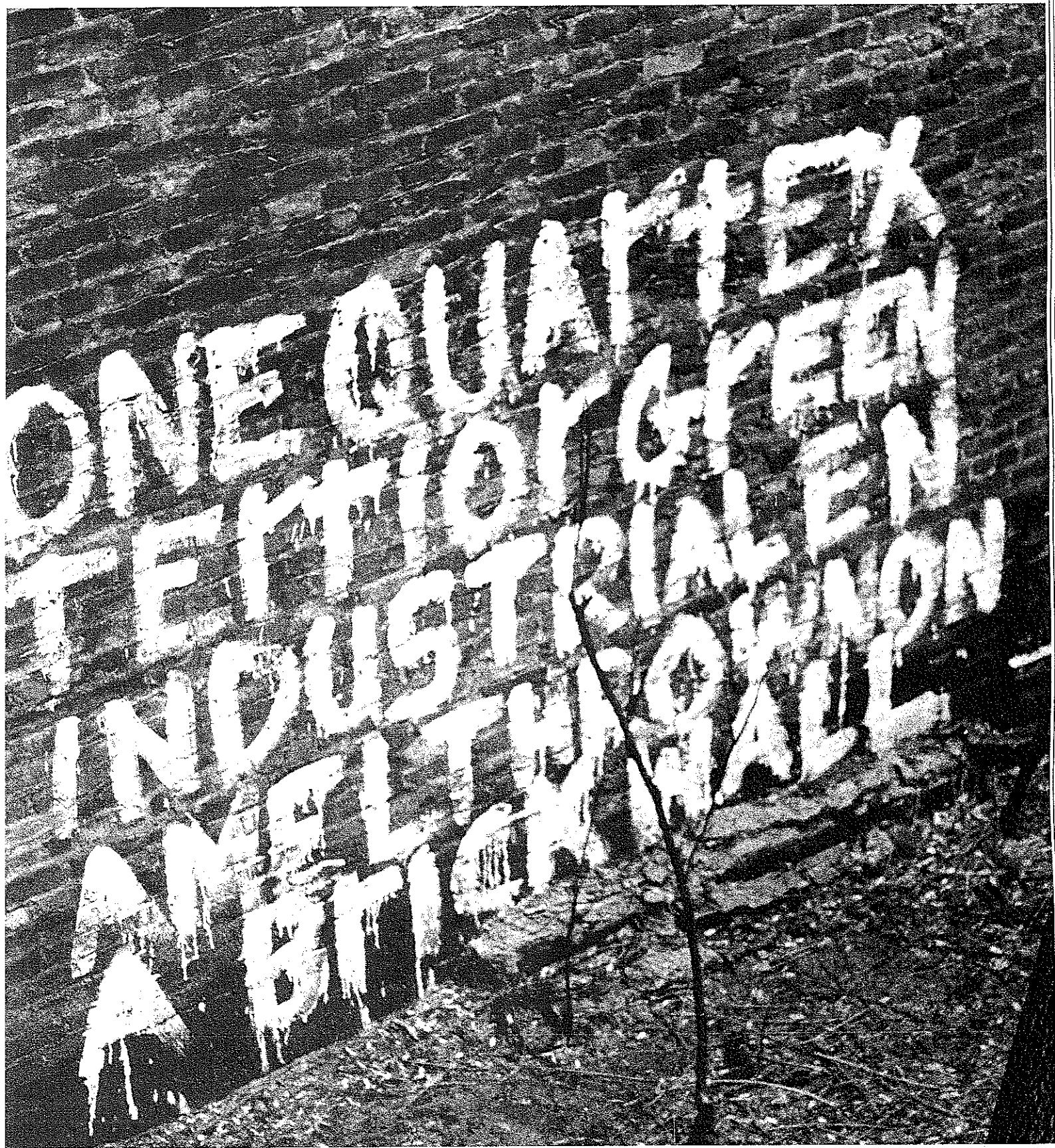
The films and videos of Lawrence Weiner

By LIZ KOTZ

Since Lawrence Weiner's works are made of language, they can go anywhere words can go: across a wall; onto buildings, posters, manhole covers, and matchbooks; and into books and magazines. But for nearly 40 years Weiner has also been translating his text pieces into films, videos, audio projects, and, more recently, CD-ROMs and DVDs. The artist's films and videos have a curious status. Because they are rarely screened publicly, they have gained notoriety through hearsay—works seldom discussed in relation to his rather vast production, yet more often discussed than seen. In many ways they are opportunities for Weiner to take his short, sometimes cryptic linguistic expressions and place them into other contexts—to place them, in one of his favorite formulations, “into the stream of life.” Yet there is something deeply strange about watching a New Wave feature or porn video where characters intermittently issue Weiner statements. Naturally these statements break the protocols of anything resembling ordinary conversation. Hearing rather than reading Weiner's words alerts us to how his larger project explores not only the endless possibility of language but also how it fails us. By behaving oddly in a filmic context, the demanding phrases draw our attention to the unspoken tensions and forces that normal dialogue often obscures.

Weiner has described his efforts to make movies and tapes as part of his “search for a mise-en-scene,” a phrase he uses to describe a presentational format and institutional context as well as a kind of theatrical staging or putting into play of his works. In a 1990 interview, he recalled, “My movies were done at a time when I, and the majority of the artworld, began to question the configuration of where we were showing work and how we were showing work. The art magazines were allowing artists to have pages and such, but at the same time you were always within a context of advertisements and articles. I don't write magazine articles







and I don't like to write prose. I found that I had a knowledge of films and an awareness of movies."¹

And yet Weiner's foray into cinema quickly departs from most expectations we might have of video art or an artist's film. Unlike many artists of the 1960s and 1970s, who sought to question the foundations of the media image and apparatus, Weiner accepts not only that films imitate reality but that viewers in turn imitate films: "We learn by imitating. The movies have given us an enormous body of information to imitate."² And, indeed, his films present enigmatic figures of desire and possible emulation, as attractive pairs and trios wander about city streets and lounge in domestic interiors, talking and arguing, smoking and drinking, having sex. But our immersion is disrupted by constant distancing strategies—obscure, circular, and fractured narratives accompanied by overlapping sound tracks that render dialogue inaudible, with text or credits overlying the image track. On many levels, Weiner's films and videos are invaded by language.

Weiner's moving-image work began in 1970 with three shorts produced by German filmmaker Gerry Schum. In 1969-70, Schum's *Fernsehgalerie*, or television gallery, broadcast two programs of pieces by artists including Gilbert and George and Rich-

ard Serra. The 1970 series, "Identifications," was Schum's second effort, after the celebrated "Land Art." Most of the *Fernsehgalerie* works were shot on 16 mm film and then televised in an effort to bypass the conventional artist-to-collector system (although later projects were presented as limited-edition videotapes in Schum's Cologne gallery).³

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In *TO THE SEA/ON THE SEA/FROM THE SEA/AT THE SEA/BORDERING THE SEA* (1970), Weiner created "realizations" of the five titular phrases. Dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, he walks along the Dutch seacoast and toward it, places a piece of wood onto the water, and so forth. In *BEACHED* (1970), the artist, wearing similar attire, works on the edge of a rocky, wooded seashore, dragging logs out of the water and leaving them "beached." In his next video, *BROKEN OFF* (1971), after actions like breaking off a tree branch, the artist speaks into a handheld microphone and performs "broken off" by unplugging the recording device, thus ending the tape.

The characteristically simple realizations offer insights into Weiner's practice. As is well known, Weiner's terse statements evolved out of working with materials. His early articulations read like a catalogue of the types of sculptural actions found in late 1960s post-Minimal and process-based art. These projects, associated with artists including

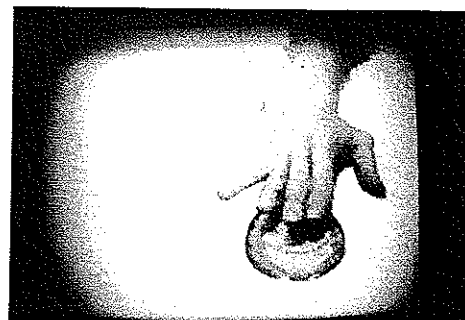
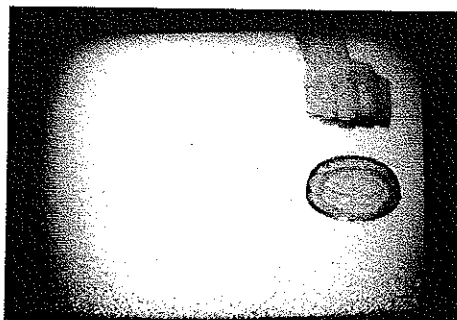
Barry Le Va, Robert Morris, and Robert Smithson, aimed to open sculpture to pliable and nonmonumental materials and, moreover, to time: to the processes of accumulation, unfolding, decay, and dispersion that make physical reality fundamentally unstable and impermanent. Although Weiner still insists that his works be understood as sculptures, his profound engagement with structures of communication and public reception led his work down paths that allied it with the then-emerging movement of Conceptual art. In the late 1960s, when he decided that he was more interested in "a general idea of materials rather than the specific," Weiner

PREVIOUS SPREAD
STILL FROM *A FIRST QUARTER*, 1973
16 MM FILM, 85 MIN

FACING PAGE
STILL FROM *A BIT OF MATTER AND A LITTLE BIT MORE*, 1976
VIDEO, 23 MIN

THIS PAGE, RIGHT
STILLS FROM *TO AND FRO/FRO AND TO/AND TO AND FRO/AND FRO AND TO*, 1972
VIDEO, 1 MIN

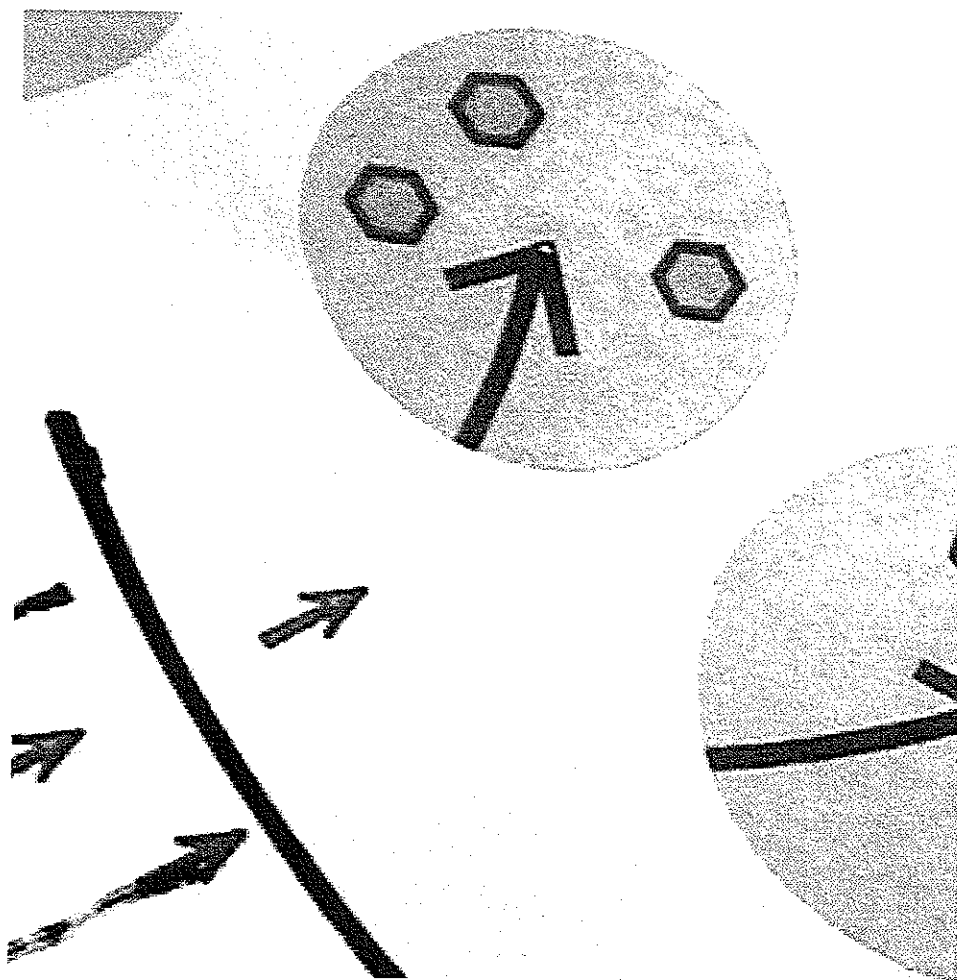
BELOW
STILL FROM *WILD BLUE YONDER*, 2002
DVD, 15 MIN 15 SEC



shifted to using language almost exclusively.⁴ By its very nature, language can indicate generally available forms; it's not welded to specific objects. Compressed and open-ended, Weiner's lapidary formulations permit any number of possible realizations—realizations that, as Weiner famously decreed, could be produced by the artist or by the receiver, or need not be built at all.

In the videos, we can see this ethic being formulated. Both *BEACHED* and *BROKEN OFF* begin with a similar announcement: "*BEACHED* is a public freehold example of what could be art within my responsibility. As the artist may construct the work, and or the work may be fabricated, and or the work need not to be built, all being equal, and consistent with my intentions, I elected to construct five material possibilities for videotape." Weiner uses the idiosyncratic term "public freehold" to designate works that belong to the common domain and cannot be owned privately. Yet in a sense all his works, consisting of words, exist in this state of continual availability for reuse. The statements are understood as structures, as describing fundamental conditions of matter and human relations to matter. Countless artists have worked with some kind of verbal score or set of instructions when designing actions (see, for instance, Vito Acconci's early "following" pieces). What is different about Weiner's work is that the texts are distilled observations of what he understands as basic functions and material properties: "broken off" and "beached" are not instructions for a performance but past-participle descriptions of states that already exist, that also can continually be created and re-created or simply observed.

Weiner has described his subsequent short works, *SHIFTED FROM THE SIDE* and *TO AND FRO/FRO AND TO/AND TO AND FRO/AND FRO AND TO* (both 1972), made with help from musician and video artist Richard Landry, as "advertisements for two works of art."⁵ In both of these pieces—made one afternoon in the back office of Leo Castelli Gallery in New York—Weiner "enacts" text works he'd formulated earlier, taking an object and manipulating it in the manner the title suggests. In *TO AND FRO*, for example, a loosely cropped image shows Weiner's hand shifting an overturned ashtray back and forth across a table in a series of four discrete gestures. After these early videos, Weiner moved away from documenting or demonstrating his works, and in-



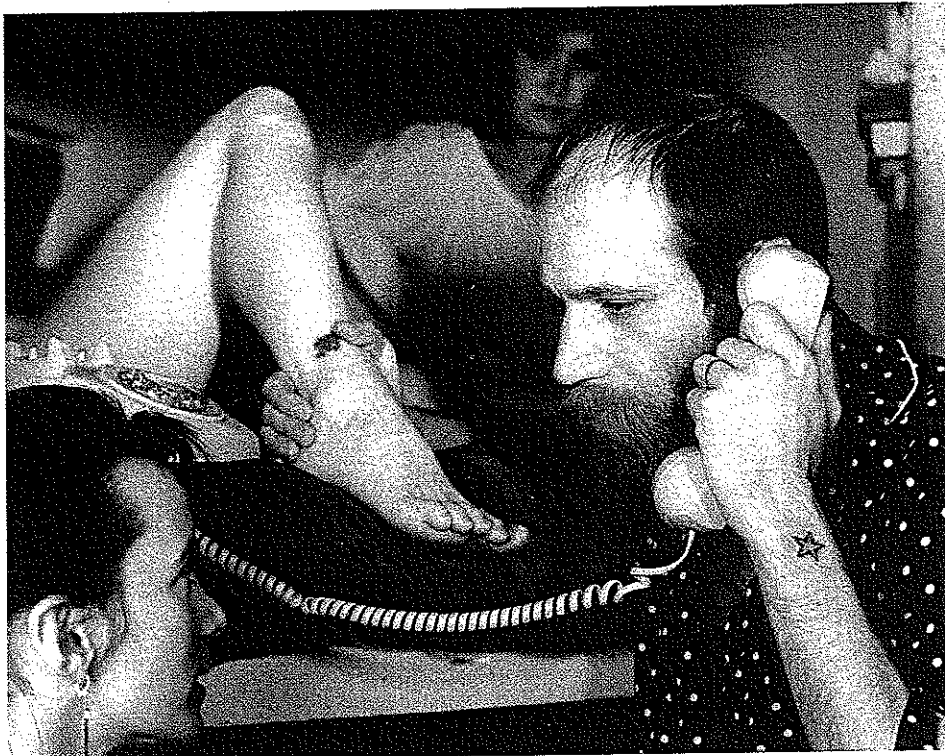
stead began exploring a film language closer to that of Godard and the French New Wave. Differentiating his films and videos from those of his contemporaries like Acconci and Michael Snow, Weiner argued, "if you are going to make a movie you may as damn well make a movie and not make a documentary about your art practice and as well take into account the medium itself of movies which we all grew up with."⁶

Shot on black-and-white video and transferred to 16 mm film, *A FIRST QUARTER* (1973) is Weiner's first feature. Funded by Leo Castelli and Jack Wendler (Weiner's dealers at the time), the film was shot,

edited, and scored in "about a month," with help from various friends. The film's lyrical yet antirealist techniques inevitably recall Godard films from the early 1960s, in which characters read aloud from texts or address the audience directly, and ambient sounds drown out dialogue in key moments. *A FIRST QUARTER* is slow-paced and decidedly somber. Yet its very obscurity draws us in, as we seek to build a narrative from the discontinuous scenes and interactions. It opens with a scene of a woman walking on a deserted beach, interrupted by a helicopter looming overhead. This scene, which repeats several times throughout the looping structure of the film,

implicitly acknowledges the American involvement in Vietnam. As Weiner recalls, "I was appalled by the situation we were in . . . because of the Indo-Chinese adventures of the mandarins of power." The film follows two women and a man who wander through a city and hang out at home. They live together, and the man seems to be involved with both women, who sleep in the same bed. Yet this potentially charged personal setup doesn't propel any real story. The narrative, to the extent that there is one, is completely ambiguous and seemingly circular. Key scenes, such as driving in a car, repeat. Throughout the film, the characters construct various Weiner pieces (like painting his 1968 *ONE QUART EXTERIOR GREEN INDUSTRIAL ENAMEL THROWN ON A BRICK WALL* onto a brick wall), and the dialogue is entirely composed of works by Weiner. Other text pieces enter the film as signage or as overlaid sound. While the man and one of the women make out on a couch, a tape plays the words "under and over and over and under" in English and French. Behind them on the wall is a board inscribed with the phrases *SHIFTED FROM THE SIDE, FLANKED BESIDES, DONE WITHOUT, MIDDLE OF THE ROAD, and LEFT OF CENTER*.

At the end, while the three characters sit around a table drinking coffee and smoking, one of the women performs the actions seen in *TO AND FRO*, moving a cigarette box back and forth across the table in a series of gestures patterned after Weiner's own realization with an ashtray. The resituation of this piece in a larger narrative is instructive. In the video, *TO AND FRO* was presented as a single work, but in *A FIRST QUARTER*, it takes place within the context of a fictional film, in which it takes on meaning and emotional charge from the fragments of human activity we have just witnessed. Especially since *TO AND FRO* occurs at the end of the film, it seems to offer some sort of commentary on the larger proceedings—as if describing the daily activities of the characters or even the underlying logic of their ménage à trois. As a structure, *TO AND FRO* is slight. Yet such simple, repetitive actions and looped routines are the very stuff of life, what we're actually doing while waiting for something to happen. Weiner's profound belief in the importance of these otherwise overlooked situations underlies all his work. His films offer an ideal venue to explore the deep emotional, cultural, and political significance of our relationships with objects and materials.



Weiner continued making films into the early 1980s, most notably the shorter fictions *PASSAGE TO THE NORTH* (1981) and *PLOWMAN'S LUNCH* (1982). Both films use frequent edits to construct highly fractured and discontinuous narratives, where suggestive scenes follow each other without a clear trajectory. Weiner describes these films as made with a mix of amateurs and professionals, but when one watches them and other works, the cast appears to be entirely composed of artists and friends, as a family-like crew of recurring participants seems to assemble from film to film. These include Weiner's wife and daughter and downtown artists and writers like Tina Girouard, Britta Le Va, Mel Kendrick, and Coosje van Bruggen. Other participants have become part of the film industry, like Kathryn Bigelow, the member of Art and Language who went on to direct *Point Break* and other films in Hollywood, and Michael Shamberg, a cofounder

stick. Both films concern emigration or a move "to the north." In *PASSAGE*, the characters debate the planned move, read aloud, behave naturally, and "act" in highly mannered ways. *PLOWMAN'S LUNCH* layers language, using English, Dutch, and a bit of French. Intertitles occasionally crowd the frame.

Even in the context of 1970s European art cinema, Weiner's movies are decidedly unusual, suspended between narrative and art project, between fiction and real life. "I essentially make home movies," Weiner has stated, and watching them, we see his daughter grow up and various friends come and go. In retrospect, this familiarity takes on surprising relevance. For the past decade or more, the contemporary artworld has been obsessed with sociability, and with artworks and projects that create a permeable relation between art and social interaction, awkwardly grouped under the rubric of "relational aesthetics." Younger artists have sought formats

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of the Raindance and TVTV video collectives and now a quite successful film producer.

Weiner refers to his cast as "players" rather than actors, and the roles they assume are more like jotted figures than fully developed identities. The films work by setting up a structure, or a series of structures, and seeing how it plays out. Many scenes seem designed as much for visual impact as any narrative function. Set in Amsterdam, *PLOWMAN'S LUNCH* begins with Alice Weiner, the artist's wife, wearing very tight bright blue pants, climbing up a hillside to write the film's title on a window in lip-

that stage continuing and unpredictable interactions and that sometimes resist or question any kind of fixed object form. One might even argue that for this generation, Weiner has emerged as a kind of father figure and hero—an example of what it is to be an artist whose practice continues to engage with the messy realities of the present while holding firm to core ethical and political principles.

Some of the stakes of Weiner's practice are clearest in his infamous 1976 porn video, *A BIT OF MATTER AND A LITTLE BIT MORE*. In the 1992 catalogue that has been the primary guide to Weiner's

FACING PAGE
STILL FROM *PASSAGE TO THE
NORTH*, 1981
16 MM FILM, 16 MIN

THIS PAGE
STILL FROM *PLOWMAN'S LUNCH*,
1982
16 MM FILM, 28 MIN
ANAL IMAGES COURTESY MOVED PICTURES,
NEW YORK

film and video works, *A BIT OF MATTER* is described as a "male/female, subject/object investigation."⁸ The film takes place in a bare, seemingly unfurnished apartment, where three couples (two male-female pairs and one lesbian pair) are having sex. The tape starts abruptly, and jarringly, with a tightly framed shot of a man and woman engaged in sexual intercourse. We don't see the people, just the genitalia; shot from below, the scene is explicit yet oddly disorienting. Weiner has talked about his works being about "the relationship of human beings to objects and objects to objects." Framing bodies in this way, the video perhaps invites us to read them as a kind of sculpture, yet of course this is not just any neutral action, but sex. The tape soon cuts away to a taped diagram on a wood floor, panning as two women walk over to it, one of them picking up a hammer and banging a nail into the floor. The relation between these two scenes, or actions, remains open ended. At the very least, the abrupt start utterly subverts any conventionally pornographic "build" or narrative.

As the three couples go about getting down, another woman, referred to as the "moderator," stands against a wall, fully clothed, and responds to questions from an offscreen interviewer, whose voice we recognize as Weiner's. Their conversation forms an internal commentary on the aims of the video: "Do you find explicit sexual material as inherently viable as a material for making art?" he asks. "It's not that interesting anymore," she responds. He persists in trying to elicit a reaction from her, and his questioning seems another displaced form of seduction: "Do you find it inherently boring to watch people screw, on film?" And later, "Would you feel comfortable in any of the roles?" The woman is in some sense our stand-in, a surrogate viewer whose comments mediate the actions for us. Other forms of language periodically enter the tape: the moderator reads from Weiner's book work, *100 ROCKS ON A WALL* (1976), and text appears within the frame—a sequence of terms, *WASHED OUT*, *CUT*, *BLACKED OUT*, *FADED*.

Weiner has always described *A BIT OF MATTER* as politically motivated, as an effort to contest the censorship and repression occurring at the time, when people working in the porn industry were being arrested and prosecuted. Throughout his career, Weiner's work has explored underlying structures of interaction. The subject of the tape is not only the



actions depicted on screen, but the relations that these actions create: the relation to the audience that views the work as well as the relations among those involved in making the video. Weiner is clearly aware of the risk and exposure the performers undertook to make the work, insisting that with *A BIT OF MATTER*, it was important to use his peers—artworld people and people of his own class—who understood his intentions and weren't participating simply for pay or for entry into the scene. The video is also an effort to test the premises of his project, to see what kinds of materials and situations can be

used for art—can be, as he put it, "viable." In Weiner's vision not only the physical relations between bodies but the emotional and social connections and resistances between people become materials for sculpture. Using explicit sexual material ups the ante. "Most pornography . . . is quite boring," he said in 1992. "But that's not the point. The point is that it becomes as viable an interaction between human beings as anything else."⁹

For more information on Lawrence Weiner, and for endnotes, turn to Index, p. 110.