From Gadget Video to Agit Video: Some Notes on Four Recent Video Works

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The usage of video technology in artistic practice since the mid sixties has undergone rapid and drastic changes. This makes it a particularly significant topic for the study of the shifts to which art in general has been subjected since the conclusion of post-Minimal and Conceptual art, the context within which video production established itself firmly as a valid practice of representation-production. These changes concern not only the affiliations of art practice with other discourses (film, television, advertising) but also the conditions of its institutional containment (video's implicit and explicit claim to lead the way out of the vicious circle of gallery and museum institution straight into the mythical public sphere of broadcast television) as well as its audience relationship (opening and broadening audiences, addressing very specific audiences at the site and the moment of their conditions and needs).

As in the first instances of the usages of film technology by artists (Léger, Man Ray, Moholy-Nagy), video technology was originally employed by artists parallel to their continuing work in painting and sculpture or conceptual practices (for example, such major video artists of the sixties as Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, and Lawrence Weiner). Since then, however, the usage of video technology has become the central production tool for a younger generation of artists, many of whom have had no background in the traditional academic disciplines of art at all but come directly out of film- and television studies or other fields such as the dramatic arts or even architecture. Therefore, video artists have generally maintained an uneasy relationship with the institutions of reception and distri-

bution of the high-art avant-garde—the museum and the gallery—and an even uneasier one with the customers of this distribution system, the private collectors. It seems that many of the potentially most progressive features of the medium have by now turned out to be a trap for the artists who find themselves caught between the vigorous reaffirmation of traditional values and techniques in the worlds of high-art and institutional television and an attitude of increasing certainty that culture, consumption, and ideology are congruent.

Although recent developments in the art world have proven the optimistic assumptions of the video artists of the late sixties and early seventies wrong on each account and have thus effectively transformed their claims into myths, it still seems necessary to recall these claims that were once made for video technology and its usage in order to recognize the industrial pressures that video art has faced since then. First, it appeared at the time that video technology would be a powerful weapon to assist language, photography, and film in the gradual dismantling of the traditional modes of cultural production, breaking down their hegemony and false claim for an organic and auratic aesthetic quality, dismantling the dominance of the fetishizing practices of painting and sculpture.

The second assumption was that electronically generated iconic imagery not only would replace the inherently retrograde aesthetics of a craft-and-skill-oriented production with its implied exclusivity and elitist domination of the field of culture but would also—by the mere fact of its technology—establish a relationship with the dominant and dominating practice of mass culture,

television, and thus reach new audiences. The promise of video technology seemed to be a progressive transformation both of the traditional fetishistic production and reception apparatus of the high-art institution and of the quasi-totalitarian conditions of the consciousness industry in television, advertising, and movie production. This promise continued the legacy of modernism's attachment to technology as an inevitably liberating force, the naïvely optimistic assumption—which had already distorted Walter Benjamin's famous "Reproduction" essay and the work of the most important artists of the twenties—that media technology could induce changes inside a sociopolitical framework without addressing the specific interests and conditions of the individuals within the political and economic ordering system.

Typical of the technocratic idealists who fostered the cult of the gadget in the field of video art is Nam June Paik, who became the role model for contemporary video artists. Another typical figure of the late sixties—and equally a heroic pioneer of video art—was Gerry Schum, who initiated the first gallery that was exclusively committed to video art and that was supposed to serve the fine-arts collector and the museum institution on the one hand and, on the other, as a studio and producer of artists' video works to be supplied to television stations for broadcasting.[1] Needless to say, neither of Schum's heroic and quixotic commitments were successful—in spite of his exceptional conviction and professional devotion to the project.

With regard to the traditional high-art apparatus and its distribution system, the project failed because private collectors could not be convinced that a

technically produced object in an artifically limited or an unlimited edition might be worth collecting and that screening videotapes like home movies was the new form of representative cultural patronage. Now that works of art have been restored to their proper condition as unique auratic objects, we know better that collecting is motivated not—in most instances—by the desire to communicate and conserve cultural production but by the need to possess. Or if not alone to possess, then to gamble with the cultural fetish's fortunes and misfortunes on the market. As for museums, they responded to the assault by video production as a mellowed follower of a once-virulent futurist threat, and gradually opened up and acquired and installed equipment for the continuous viewing of video work. Ultimately, some major institutions even developed departments for the collection and curatorial administration of video work. Yet the institutions were soon to find out not only that the new technology presented considerable problems of operation and maintenance but also that the silent perpetuity of painting and sculpture in the galleries attracted growing audiences, who in turn seemed to be rather disturbed by the presence of the television set in the museum. After all, the pilgrimage to the object of high art was not being made in order to be reminded of the barbarism of everyday life in the home and on the screen.

Institutions of mass culture temporarily made a liberal opening in the sixties for adventurers like Schum when his tapes by artists were in fact admitted for broadcasting on several occasions. The most appropriate was probably the proposal by the Dutch artist Jan Dibbets to broadcast a prerecorded image of a fireplace on network television for several minutes. Inevitably, the institutional managers found out that these artists' ideas about television did not really agree with theirs or those of their audiences, let alone those of their advertising patrons. The best that could be hoped for at that time was a mutual exchange of tokenism between the institutions of high and low culture and the myths that this would generate: that high culture was committing itself—once again—radically to the formation and technology of mass-cultural representation and that the mass-cultural institution was liberal and civilized enough to support the isolated and ailing high-art practices. The contradictions inherent in these myths were particularly evident on the level of video distribution and reception. While the commercial galleries of the sixties were attempting to make artists' tapes attractive as items for traditional collectors (hoping perhaps that a new collector's

personality would develop, a fetishist without the object but with the apparatus perhaps), they were also trying to maintain the radical stance of the video work as an "anti-artistic" and "dematerialized" carrier of visual and textual information and to keep the rental fees for this democratic tool of cultural instruction and entertainment sufficiently inexpensive to make it accessible to a broader public than fine art had hitherto allowed for. It seems by now that the few commercial operations engaged in video-art distribution that have survived the late-sixties adventure in media optimism have decided to keep sales and rental fees for videotapes high enough to compensate for illegal dubbing and pirating of the tapes, which means that the rental of a videotape can easily be as expensive as that of a two-hour feature movie or a public lecture by an artist in an educational institution.

Those who were involved in production in the sixties seem to have been unaware that video technology required and generated its own syntax and vocabulary and that the practices of mass-cultural institutions and high-cultural conventions were not so easily integrated. Often the results of artists' involvement with the technique of video were rather peculiar hybrids that could just as easily have been produced with traditional film equipment. Only those artists who, like Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, and Richard Serra, were explicitly involved in a phenomenological analysis of the viewers' relationship to the sculptural construct and to the surrounding architectural container were successful in employing video technology in its most essential and specific capacities of simultaneous recording and reproduction, feedback of image and sound, duration and delay of temporal experience in the context of a sculptural installation. Although these artists were acutely aware of the unique and specific qualities of video technology for the purposes of their sculptural investigations, they deliberately ignored altogether the technology's origin and containment in the mass-cultural industry of television. This was only a typical instance of the modernists' assumption that their perceptual and aesthetic investigation takes place in a socially and politically neutral field—the virtual space of art—and is all the more astonishing since the founder of video practice in art, Nam June Paik, since 1965 had always emphasized the interdependence of the institutions of television and the avant-garde. Unfortunately, however, that interdependence was never subjected to a critical analysis, and Paik never addressed the political implications of the ideological apparatus of television. This accounts for the fact

that his ideas of resistance and subversion remained on the level of the anarchic, playful opposition, countering the totalitarianism of the consciousness industry with the transformation of its technology into the gadget.

The first artist of the generation of post-Minimal sculptors who really addressed the issue of television as being inseparable from the usage of video technology was Richard Serra. After producing a number of video and film works that employed all of the medium's specific potential for a temporal and spatial analysis of a viewer's relationship to a sculptural process and construct, Serra produced a videotape that explicitly acknowledged the technique's dependence on the institution of television: *Television Delivers People.*[2] This tape not only referred to the ideological affiliation of the technology but also explicitly addressed a non-high-art audience, since it was intended for broadcast television and it "spoke" to the television public rather than to the museum or gallery public.

At some point the history of the relationship between the traditional high-art avant-garde and the new video technology will have to be written. It will be surprising how many of the same grotesque features and problems that marked photography's encounter with the high-art institutions in the nineteenth century—the pretenses and disavowels, the mimicry and disguises—were also at work in the interrelationship of video technology and its artistic practitioners.

One of the key figures in the development of post-Minimal video art is Dan Graham, who has employed video technology since the late 1960s for the construction of sculptural situations. The term "situational aesthetics" was used at that time with various meanings, but it could be applied to Graham's work to describe the multiplicity of its focus, dealing with the particular conditions of the site of the sculptural construction in terms of architectural space at the same time as with the psychological space generated by the interaction of the viewers with the construction itself, the behavior-space of audience and performers.[3]

Graham acknowledged his historical debt to the sculptors of Minimal art and the post-Minimal work explicitly; for the usage of video it was particularly in the work of Bruce Nauman that Graham had recognized the technology's peculiar and specific capacity to heighten an audience's sense of the phenomenological interdependence of spatial, temporal, material, and perceptual elements that constituted in their totality the phenomenon that had been tradi-

tionally referred to as "sculpture." Thus, video technology provided the most accurate means for a true self-reflexivity of spatial conditions and temporal processes as required by advanced contemporary definition of the sculptural experience.

At the same time, video technology also provided the means for a different kind of self-reflexivity: the reflection of internal psychological and behavioral processes, be it those of the author or those of the audience. Against the legacy of a formalist ban on subject matter and subjectivity (as Greenberg had demanded, it had to be "avoided like the plague") artists like Vito Acconci and Joan Jonas in the late sixties employed video for the recording and transmission of psychological content and subject matter, almost as if they wanted to resist not only that formalist legacy but also the restriction to a pure phenomenological neutrality of behavior that Minimal art had at least admitted back into the discussion of aesthetic practice and experience.

The impermanence of many of the installations by Nauman, Acconci, Graham, and Jonas and the inevitably "dramatic" qualities of an analytical approach to behavior processes led numerous critics to the discovery of a distinctly "theatrical" quality in the work of these artists, presumably a "theater of the conceptual" and of narcissistic self-reflection.[4] This misapprehension originated in Michael Fried's misreading of the insistence of Minimal artists on incorporating a phenomenological reflection on audience participation in terms of a traditional theatrical performance. Emphasis on the contingency and contiguity of the perceptual construct (with which Robert Morris, in, for example, his *Mirrored Cubes* of 1964, had initiated a critique of the modernist notion of the autonomous space of sculpture) forms also the basis of the video work produced by these artists in the late sixties and early seventies.

Unlike that of Nauman or Acconci, however, Graham's work from the very beginning explicitly reflects on the condition that all video practice *qua* technique is originating and ultimately contained in the dominant mass-cultural discourse of television. This would be best evidenced in a work from 1971, *Project for a Local Cable TV*,[5] where one of Graham's typical experiments to survey and record the dynamics and mechanics of an exchange between two individuals is linked to the community audience via cable network. The two individuals in this particular case have been instructed not to act out internalized modes of social role behavior—as in so many other earlier works of Gra-

ham—but to act out two opposing viewpoints on issues of community concern. By feeding the opposing positions through permutations (each adversary assumes alternatingly the other's position), the community is encouraged to respond and engage in an active mode of participation in the viewing and receiving process of television. Although this work is clearly marked by the utopian thinking of the late sixties (in its media optimism and in its naïveté towards the apparatus of mass culture and the powers that control it), it is also an outstanding example of a video work in which the three dimensions of video art and its unique and specific potentials are most clearly integrated. Whereas Acconci concentrated on video's potential for feedback and mirror reflection and its psychological implications of self-reflection, introspection, and the exemplary acting out of the imaginary worlds of self-projection and identification and Nauman restricted his installations to abstract formal and perceptual experiments that excluded psychological subject matter beyond that of the psychology of perception of time and space, Graham clearly opts from the very beginning for video's sociopolitical potential in every respect. On the level of the reflection of spatiotemporal phenomena, Graham's works are conceived of as the containers of social interaction, never as pure sculptural constructs or aestheticized domains of neutrality and purity as they emerge at the same time at the West coast in post-Minimal sculpture. On the level of individual or interpersonal psychological reflection, Graham emphasizes the dependence of individual psychic formations on social and political conditions rather than treating them as separate phenomena that occur in a space of behavior and intrapsychic reality disconnected from the conditions of reality. Finally, and most important for the subject of our discussion, Graham introduces the social institution of the language formation and of the technology that he employs directly into the conception of his projects and underlines within the video work its intricate and inevitable correlation with broadcast television.

T he most complex and advanced work of this kind was produced by Dan Graham in collaboration with Dara Birnbaum in 1978: *Local Television News Program Analysis for Public Access Cable Television*.[6] It is crucial both to recall the implications of this work in order to understand the changes that have occurred in current video practice (particularly in that of Graham and Birnbaum) and to clarify its by-now historical qualities in order to criticize its limitations and to underline its unful-

filled radical potential, its relevance for contemporary thinking, which attempts to avoid these concerns. The most pertinent and striking feature of the work is once again its media optimism and its belief that access to public broadcast television will be only a matter of time and proper organization and that the instrument of television could then be turned around from being the most powerful social institution of manipulation and control to becoming an instrument of self-determination, two-way communication, exchange, and learning.

The second historical feature of the work is its abstract relationship to its audience. It is certainly one of the most advanced works with regard to reflections on audience conditions, but, paradoxically, it is also one of the most limited. The assumption that a television audience would be interested enough to submit itself willingly to a radical procedure of deconstruction and defamiliarization during its evening dosage of news mythology in order to recognize its own condition of ideological containment follows the century-old delusion of modernist enlightenment that aesthetic constructs have only to confront audiences with the perceptual and cognitive means of penetrating the layers of ideological mythification that mask the social and political conditions of everyday life to make them rediscover the underlying reality and to initiate the transition from the isolation of passive high-cultural consumption to an aesthetics of instrumentality and active change. This modernist notion that the avant-garde could break down the isolation of high bourgeois culture and its institutionalization by introducing audiences to mass-cultural subject matter in an unmediated form—and that this would engage the audiences of mass culture and disengage the bourgeois audiences' claim to exclusive access to cultural knowledge and experience—was certainly still conditioning Graham's attempts in the early seventies to reflect upon audience conditions in his video work for television broadcast. As Bertolt Brecht struggling with precisely those problems in the thirties had argued, the "truth not only had to be beautiful, but also entertaining."

In his most recent video work Dan Graham seems to have altered his strategies altogether, and it seems that the reflections that initiated the changes engage in precisely those questions. First of all, and quite remarkably different, Graham's recent video work is no longer an installation project but "simply" a pre-produced videotape entitled *Rock My Religion (Fig. 1)*.[7] Although this transition from situational sculpture installations to scripted and produced videotape with predefined subject mat-

Fig. 1 Jerry Lee Lewis, still from Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion,* 1983.

ter is by no means necessarily a definitive change in Graham's work, it certainly indicates a drastic shift of concerns.

One of the major implications in the abandonment of the modernist insistence on the material presence of an aesthetic construct (the facture of the painting, the sculptural objecthood) in favor of a system of representations that defines itself already by its distribution form as a reproduced and reproducible entity in a universe of technically reproduced imagery (a step that all video artists make) is the denial of the exclusive validity of *any* unique artistic construct and the particular places reserved for these objects (museums, galleries, alternative spaces). Rather it opts for an aesthetic product that is multiple and diversified in its distribution and exhibition contexts, that shifts its audiences at least potentially, and, most crucially, that addresses existing systems and mechanisms of representation, and that is not attempting to conjure up in social reality the individual instance of a "work" or an aesthetic solution.

Yet what the work gains in universality and potential audience access by inserting itself into the mass-cultural totality of floating representations, it loses in material specificity and contextual concreteness, the sources from which avant-garde high culture in modernism had traditionally drawn its capacity of resistance. These problematic qualities are inherent in Graham's new video work as well. Although his subject matter is clearly a mass-cultural topic—the historical interrelationship of religious deviance, sexual abstinence, and the origins of ecstatic musical practices in nineteenth-century America as the sources for contemporary Rock and Roll music—his approach and handling of the material is clearly marked by the individuality of an artist as author, and we are confronted with a highly subjective reading of a history that may tell us more about present-day circumstances than about its historical material. The idiosyncratic and eclectic compilation of

the material in Graham's subjective history of the relationship between Rock and Roll and religion is highly original and it would be foolish to judge the results by the standard of academic historical research in the field of the history of religion or that of mass-cultural practices of delirious consumption. Yet even if one grants the tape all the individual rights to select at will and compile at random from the complex history of that interrelationship in artistic *bricolage* manner, it also provokes a response to the subjectivity of the choice and the construction of that history resulting from it. Thus it is astonishing that Graham should omit from his construction of the panorama of religious and musical consumption any reference whatsoever to the fact that this history cannot possibly be written without considering the contribution of the black working class and its musicians or reflecting on its cultural contribution in the context of its role as the traditionally exploited and oppressed proletarian class of American society. In the contemporary part of Graham's analysis this historical omission has its equivalent in the total obliteration of the basis of Rock and Roll in the apparatus of the culture industry. Although Graham's main argument— that contemporary mass-cultural practices have inherited and transformed the functions of the religious practices in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America—is striking and convincing .(perhaps not all that new and original as the author may believe) and certainly provides the basis for a study of the history of the functions and formations of ideology, in particular the increase of irrationality under the rigid regimenta-

tion of time, the rationalization of all experience, and the ensuing instrumentalization of individuals according to the needs of industrial capital, it fails to recognize the impossibility of analyzing the subliminal subversive functions of mass culture (such as a resistance against the work ethic, against the functionalization of sexuality and the family order, the denial of prescribed and functionalized sexual role behavior), and even their manifest subversive qualities, without discussing at the same time how it is precisely the mythical quality of that supposed subversion and liberation that qualifies Rock music as a perpetual repetition of the same ritual (in analogy to the mythical rhythms of identity construction through fashion production) and as such as an inexhaustible source for industrial production and consumption.

Despite the manifest shortcomings of Graham's *Rock My Religion,* the phenomena of mass culture are here approached for the first time from a high-cultural vantage point that is radically different from the traditional attitude of appropriation and quotation *(Fig. 2).* This attitude has been most adequately described by Thomas Crow in a recent essay as a continuous process of extraction, exploitation, and commercial redistribution.[8] Mass-cultural phenomena are extracted by the vanguard from their context in order to inject ailing avant-garde representational systems with a new air of radicality while initiating a process of control and containment. Once absorbed into high culture, the newly legitimized and legitimizing mass-cultural practices can then be disseminated once again on the mar-
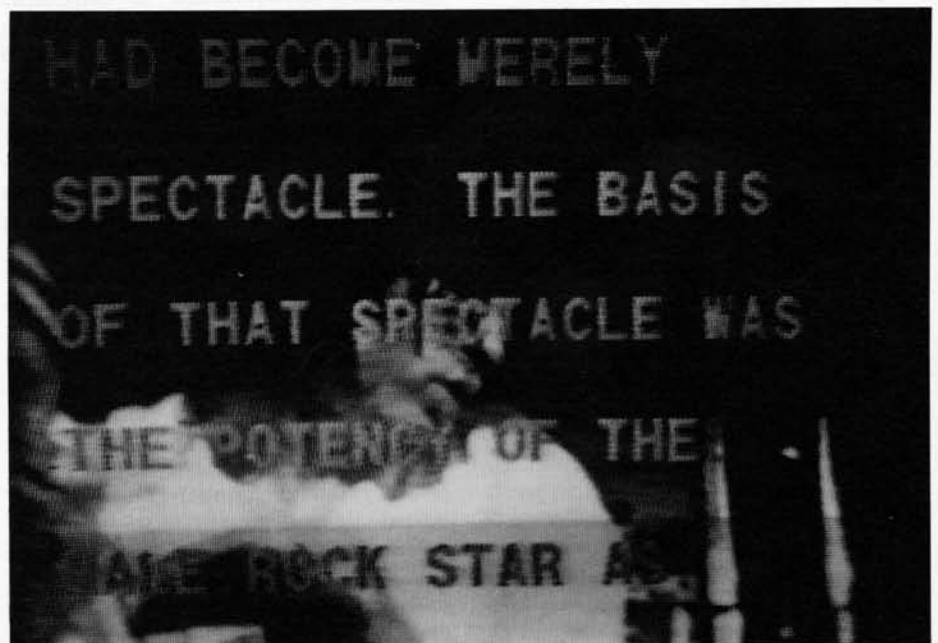

Fig. 2 Jim Morrison, The Doors, still from Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion.* 1983.

ket (the recent fate of the graffiti movement would certainly confirm this theory).

Graham's approach does not follow the traditional high-art strategies of quotation, but attempts to develop a more complex documentary and factographic method. Rather than skimming the surface of the mass-cultural phenomenon for the skill, the chill, and the gruesomely crude cultural substitutes of the lower classes (as is currently fashionable once again in painting), Graham's work attempts to construct a comprehensive reading and an analysis of the history of the relations between religion and Rock and Roll. Although it would be difficult for an academic historian to agree with that model in every respect, it is also obvious that Graham's original, idiosyncratic approach to the subject establishes relationships between phenomena that will become the subjects for the more systematic and academic forms of mass-cultural studies for the future. In particular, his selection of the figure of Ann Lee, the English working-class woman who emigrated to the United States in search of religious freedom to become the founder of the Shaker movement, as the focal point of his historical background of the origins of Rock and Roll and his selection of Patti Smith as her contemporary working-class correlative heroine position the work in a direct affiliation with contemporary questions concerning the roll of class and of gender and sexual politics in the definition of cultural production. Further, in the tape's emphasis on the subject of religion we find as much reflection on the conditions of the present as we find attempts at a historical analysis. And finally, in Graham's reflection on the history of the counterculture movement of the sixties one recognizes a reflection of the conditions of contemporary reality (that is, the age of Reagan and the dominant modes of neoconservative thinking) through the strategies of reconsidering the historically unfulfilled potential of the recent past.

Having been produced with an incredibly low budget, the sixty-minute tape does not measure up to the standards of broadcast television (and even if it did technically, it is highly dubious whether this unorthodox, methodological synthesis of Horkheimer/Adorno, Benjamin, Foucault, and Lacan would be acceptable to public-broadcasting channels). More problematic, however, is the fact that the author of the tape does not seem to have considered at all who the *actual* audience of the tape could be.

It is clear that the tape *Rock My Religion* fits neither the program of the

Fig. 3 Dara Birnbaum, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman,* 1978, still from videotape.

"cultural" channels that broadcast Masterpiece Theatre nor the channels that pipe MTV to the adolescent consumers of industrial music. Nor would Graham maintain at this time the typical art-world myth of finding new audiences in the clubs and discos of the city where giant video screens fill the voids between sets—a myth that a number of video artists propagated seriously for a while as an answer to the insupportable ghettoization of video work in the art-world institutions. While the audience for Graham's work is therefore unspecific—and that is clearly problematic—it is at least shifting and diffuse, and the work is potentially open to non-art-world audiences, neither fixed in its distribution form nor exclusively contained in one particular institutional apparatus.

To what degree contemporary video art oscillates between mass-cultural formations (the technological and the ideological apparatus of television, whose language critique and knowledge production video art aspires to become) and the high-cultural formation of avant-garde art (the institutional and discursive apparatus whose traditional limitations video claims to supersede, yet to which it is intricately bound) has recently become evident in the work of Dara Birnbaum. She is one of the artists who emerged in the context of the early seventies to become exclusively involved in video work. Through her early awareness of the work of Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, and Dan Graham, she came to understand the shortcomings of a video practice that remained inside the traditional boundaries of the art-world institutions of private collection, gallery, and museum; and it was partially through the collaboration with Dan Graham on the *Local Television News Program Analysis* that the focus for a video practice addressing the conventions of television was set. At the same time it is evident that Birnbaum's work is firmly grounded in her experience as an artist and her education as an architect and that her approach to the imagery, technology, and ideology of mass culture has its historical origins in the attitude of Pop artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. As she once stated, she "wants to define the language of video in relation to the institution of television in the way Buren and Asher had defined the language of painting and sculpture in relation to the institution of the museum."[9]

Since her first video tape, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–79) *(Fig. 3),* Birnbaum has consistently used the strategies of quotation and montage as they had been provided by the avant-garde conventions of Dada, collage, and Pop art. The material that she quoted were excerpts from popular broadcast television selected according to genre and iconic significance as well as according to the hidden dominance of the technological device by which the particular segment of quotation was marked. Thus the tapes, which run an average seven minutes, are clearly structured around the central categories of sitcom and soap opera, commercials and game shows, live broadcast and serial

stereotype television material. Equally selective emphasis is put on the devices of television itself, since each tape by Birnbaum seems almost to distill the essence of the standard television strategies by excluding all other aspects (narrative, sequentiality, combination, and simultaneous operation of various devices). In this rigorous reduction of the syntax, grammar, vocabulary, and genres of the language of commercial television does Birnbaum's work follow the procedures of deconstruction as they were developed in the context of modernist collage and montage work, and the effects of her application of these high-art strategies are stunning: revealing to the viewer that the apparatus of television conveys its ideological message as much by its formal strategies and its technique as by its manifest subject matter.

The formal strategies of Birnbaum's tapes seemed obvious: addressing an art-world audience through the quotation of Pop art conventions and simultaneously as a general reflection on the conditions of contemporary video practice, the work directed attention to the governing media in mass culture and the technological sophistication with which these operate. In this juxtaposition Birnbaum also delivered criteria (if only by implication) that defined the standards of reflection on contemporary art practice in general: its relative limitations, its institutional boundaries, its traditional production procedures. At the same time, however, Birnbaum's work seemed to move out into a different context altogether. For one thing, it clearly seemed to approach new and different audiences since the ideal place for the distribution of her video work would be the television set itself: inside the language and inside the distribution as well as inside the institution of television would the quotation and deconstruction of television be most successful, and they would effectively dismantle the totality of television ideology.

In her most recent videotape, however, Birnbaum has taken an utterly different approach, one that may make us even reconsider our assumptions about her earlier work. *The Damnation of Faust: Evocation* (1983) *(Fig. 4)* seems to have originated in the desire to distance herself from a premature identification of her practice as one of appropriation of pirated TV imagery and a reduction of her work to the seemingly one-dimensional critical engagement with television. It seems to have been further motivated by the desire to turn her back on the questioning of avant-garde's relationship to mass culture and seems to argue for a renewed exclusive attachment of contemporary artistic

Fig. 4 Dara Birnbaum, *Damnation of Faust: Evocation,* 1983, still from videotape.

practice to the history of bourgeois high culture.

Although there would seem at first to be no problem in a contemporary attempt to reconstruct a version of the Faust legend (the puppet show, the poetic drama, the opera—whichever version Birnbaum might claim to have had in mind), the affiliation with the subject in Birnbaum's work remains on the level of the title alone (unless one would consider the repeated images of a young woman reading a book, looking out of the window earnestly, sitting in the wind and reeds an adequate representation of a contemporary female Faust version). The rest of the tape consists of footage that was recorded in the Italian section of Soho, and it shows children in a playground, on swings and benches behind wire mesh, with one adolescent girl receiving explicit camera attention since she seems to be a premature victim of the socially enforced, female narcissistic desire for self-display in the behavioral and physiognomic terms that the apparatuses of advertising and television provide. Although Birnbaum's sense for these intricate connections is exceptional, her capacity to observe and reveal them seems to have been overpowered here by her tendency to identify sentimentally with the luring cliché of youthful beauty. The meaningless imagery of Birnbaum's footage has been subjected to an editing process that seems to have been motivated by a primary obsession to apply every single electronic computerized editing device as extensively as possible and with more sophistication and aesthetic bravura than the industry would

ever be able to muster. Drop wipes of all kinds, colored linear splits, and, in particular, fan wipes seem to have caught Birnbaum's vision as infinitely fascinating visual operations. Although she claims that it is from the tradition of nineteenth-century *japonisme* that she received the idea to use these electronic editing gadgets and the formal play that they allow for, it remains at first opaque why *japonisme* would enter a contemporary videotape or what the connection between Faust (be it that of Goethe, Gounod, Berlioz, or Delacroix—to mention the historical adaptations that come close to the rise of *japonisme*) and Japanese woodcuts could possibly mean.

Birnbaum does not seem to realize that her obsession with "state-of-the-art" editing technology and the newest devices and tricks of computer-generated and controlled electronic imagery brings her work dangerously close to that kind of contemporary video production that has made it all along its prime ambition to produce the most advanced technocratic art of the state. The video work of Sanborn-Fitzgerald would be an example of the kind of work produced by "artists" who have become voluntary members of a corporate claque that has the smartness to perform (not the intelligence to understand) Baudrillard's observation that the time has long since passed when ideology was conveyed by political means and that it is now in the visual and linguistic coding systems where the affirmation of ruling ideology can most successfully be enforced.

The violent aestheticization of the viewers' gaze by the absolute fetishization of the technical gadget (competing

with and delivering to the advanced practices of advertisement design and the superpower of special effects in commercial film) seems in Birnbaum's recent tape directed at a successful entry into broadcast television itself. Yet no longer does this move seem to be motivated by the need to transgress the boundaries of a false exclusivity of high culture or to criticize the ideological power of television within its own language; it now appears to be motivated by the compulsion to enter that system and to become compatible with it, to construct a smooth transition from one sphere to the next that eliminates even the *memory* of the differences that might have once existed between cultural production and cultural industry. It seems, to put it polemically, that if given a chance, Birnbaum would consider it an honor to redesign and produce in a more aesthetically satisfying style a few spots or a few snippets for MTV's growing supermarket of industrial music. Only at first glance does *Faust* in its apparent commitment to high-cultural subject matter of the bourgeois past (after all, that *is* the subject of Goethe's *Faust:* the rise and formation of the bourgeois personality) oppose that liquidation of the qualitative differences between aesthetic practice and cultural industry. On closer reading—or repeated viewing—the originally unfathomable reference to the Faust legend (which is, as actual subject, all but absent from the tape) as well as the incoherent and incomprehensible junction of the Faust subject with late-nineteenth-century *japonisme* become clearer. (Once again the paraphrase of that phenomenon is so vague that it is not even clear whether Birnbaum actually refers to the Japanese woodcut designs and their spatial and graphic ordering systems themselves in order to construct a striking antecedent for her own graphic and spatial structuring of the video image by means of new editing technology or whether she actually wants to establish a reference to the reception of these techniques in late-nineteenth-century French Postimpressionist and Symbolist art and to relate her own current artistic practice to that history and the *japonisme* tradition.)

In the same manner that *The Damnation of Faust* orients itself in its deployment of advanced technology to the successful entry into the institution of television (if as nothing else, then at least as a source of examples of a stylish and sophisticated usage of technology that the mindless managers of the industry are always eager to pick up from artists in order to glamorize their perpetual repetition of the same), it orients itself—in its pretense to high-cultural

subject matter and to the legacy of exotic and high-cultural painterly and graphic techniques of composition and design—to the institution of the museum (and by implication the art-world distribution systems at large). Here the reaffirmation of the hegemony of traditional modes of painterly and sculptural production and their outright affirmation of the unquestionable hegemony of a fetishized notion of an immutable high-culture continuity has reemerged and taken a dominant, not to say exclusive, position. It is as a precise parallel to the strategies employed by these artists that the willful and meaningless quotation and assemblage of high-cultural subject matter in Birnbaum's videotape becomes understandable: to assert at this moment the unproblematic, continued hegemony of the high-cultural tradition (its subject matter, its production procedures, its distribution form, its reception processes, its audiences, and its institutions). This seems to be the only artistic strategy available to institute artistic production in a position and a discourse of power (as opposed to one of marginality, institutional—not to mention market—neglect, inefficacy, and isolation from the mainstream of cultural support).

Birnbaum's earlier work deserves credit for having approached the dialectic between the barbarism of mass culture and the autocratic elitism of high culture, a dialectic that has marked the entire history of modernism and reflects the essential problem of bourgeois class society's division of labor, but it is—at least on the grounds of this tape— becoming obvious where her orientation will lead her work. Admittedly, the tape has been declared to be the "prologue" for a long work consisting of several parts, and it may be premature to judge it. But since it has been shown as an independent unit of the *Faust* project by Birnbaum on many occasions, one must assume that it represents the author's ideas and strategies adequately on its own. Her ideas seem far from any attempt to counteract the desublimation by the mass-cultural formations by insisting on the historical potential of bourgeois culture as a bastion against the destruction of individuality (an attitude that many artists have developed as a practice of resistance, most convincingly the films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub or, in the visual art's, the work of Marcel Broodthaers). But this resistance demands more than the simplistic propping of contemporary practice with fragments from the history of high culture—more than using the rubble of high-cultural history as barricades for the defense of class interest and privileges—incorporated in the out-

moded production procedures and iconography of contemporary neofigurative painting and sculpture with which Birnbaum tries to compete. By aligning her video imagery to the aesthetic demands that these artists supply with goods (ironically, when it comes to graphic and chromatic expressivity, the traditional modes are far superior to even the most audacious gadgets that Birnham's editing introduces) and by succumbing to the pressure of the cultural apparatus (as one that mediates the pressure of the other ideological formations in society) to reaffirm and reconstitute the old hierarchical value systems that the reception of the history of high-bourgeois culture seems to provide, Birnbaum betrays the original impact of her own work and its far-ranging potential as well as the inherent possibilities of contemporary video practice in general: to produce a language of critique and resistance, to represent the interests of audiences subjected to the totalitarianism of the television industry, and to interfere within the elusive isolationism of high-cultural privileges.

T he questions of audience address and audience specificity, but most of all the question of enlarging the scope of a public that is approached in the essentially public medium of video, were recently developed further in a collaborative work that Jenny Holzer organized on the occasion of the 1984 presidential elections. I should say from the start that although I think that this project tackled these questions more successfully than any other contemporary video work that I am aware of, it also delivered the proof that a resolution of these problems is not to be achieved by aesthetic or technological means alone. Holzer's project certainly took the claim of many video artists seriously: to engage in a dialogue with a public that is not a public of gallery-going specialists focusing on the questions of a specialized industry of high culture. Holzer for this purpose organized the rental and installation of a large truck designed to display messages on a thirty-foot video screen (a Mitsubishi screen comparable to those being installed in baseball stadiums to give viewers instant close-ups, slow motions, and replays of the action). This *Sign on a Truck*,[10] as Holzer entitled the project, was installed on two different days in two different central locations in midtown and downtown Manhattan before Election Day, displaying more than thirty prerecorded messages and images by artists and authors as well as direct interviews that Holzer and her collaborators had conducted in the street, asking passersby about their political concerns and opin-

ions. The project also encouraged, during open microphone sessions, the direct interference and participation of the viewers in the process of forming a visual and verbal representation of the political reality of the viewers *(Fig. 5)*.

As much as this project seems to be a successful continuation of the agitprop techniques of the Soviet avant-garde in their usage of agit-trains, boats, and trucks employed for the instruction of the illiterate masses of post-Revolutionary Russia and as much as it seems to integrate contemporary technology successfully with the needs of the late-capitalist urban public and its peculiar forms of illiteracy, the work also revealed considerable problems.

In the same way that Brecht's famous dictum emphasized that statements about the reality of the Krupp factory can no longer be made by simply photographing the buildings' facades and that an accompanying constructed text is necessary to reconstruct the reality that has moved into the "functional," it is nowadays a false assumption that a representation of political views and realities on the mind of the populace could be obtained by a quest for a direct expression, by polling statements in the street. This idea of a "publicness" of opinion and direct self-representation, its claim for the dimension of an unmediated spontaneity and directness of expression, is in itself responsible for enhancing the mythical distortion of the reality of the "public." Without an artificial construction that accompanies the spontaneous representation of the collective consciousness, we shall be confronted simply with the voices of the ideological state apparatuses as they have been internalized, the synthesis of prejudice and propaganda, of aggressive ignorance and repression, of cowardice and opportunism that determine the mind of the so-called public (especially the white middle-class public, as Holzer's tapes showed abundantly). The artifical construction—Brecht's idea of the caption—is crucial to make the distortion of collective thought evident both to those who are constituted by it and to those who contemplate its representation on Holzer's video screen in the *Sign on a Truck* so that they may recognize and understand their own conditions: that the systematic depoliticization of the individual, the constant deprivation of information and of educational tools, cannot be compensated for by the enforcement of consumption.

It would be naïve, however, to assume that the ambivalence of Holzer's installation work was only the logical outcome of her commitment to the notion of a popular spontaneity, the notion of a populace that essentially knows what is

Fig. 5 Jenny Holzer, Open Mike, at *Sign on a Truck,* 1984.

Fig. 6 Vito Acconci's contribution to Jenny Holzer's *Sign on a Truck,* 1984.

right and what is wrong if it is only given the proper means of direct self-expression. This anarchistic trust in the collective mind as being innately democratic, concerned with its environment and social equality and justice, has long become a myth that itself functions to protect us from insight into the actual operations to which the collective mind is subjected. An overwhelming number of the people who were interviewed by Holzer during the open-mike sessions, as well as during the interviews that she and other participants conducted in the street before the installation of *Sign on a Truck,* turned out to be fervent supporters of Ronald Reagan. Thus some messages emanating from the sign could be perceived as part of a pro-Reagan cam-

paign while other sections could not be mistaken for anything but compelling arguments and statements against the reelection of Reagan (the best example being Vito Acconci's exceptionally striking videotape- and sound montage) *(Fig. 6).* This liberal ambivalence was in fact an accurate reflection of the funding conditions that had enabled Holzer to deploy this spectacular video device in the first place: in order to receive the public funding necessary for the extremely high rental fee of the truck (funding was provided by the New York State Council on the Arts as well as the city government's Public Projects in the Arts) Holzer had to commit herself to a project that did not engage directly in the support of one particular political opinion or party.

Although Holzer's organizational success in raising these funds deserves admiration as much as her installation deserves recognition for setting new standards for what art in public places should currently do if it wants to merit its claim to operate in the public sphere, one must also, in a sense, regard these as limitations in order to point out the actual contradictions within which current political art practice sees itself contained. On the one hand, the success of the work clearly depended on the presence of the megatechnology: only this apparatus could stop people in the streets and make them as much as listen to a politically controversial argument that departed from the daily "neutrality" of media reportage. And this technological spectacle, which guaranteed the work's access to the public sphere in the streets of New York, could be afforded only with the help of funding agencies that imposed political constraints on the project. In the same manner that the traditional exclusivity of the work of art in the confines of the museum and the gallery had to be questioned, the myth of a new public audience that can be unconditionally addressed has to be examined in all aspects that actually condition audiences.

M artha Rosler's most recent video work, *A Simple Case for Torture* (1983) *(Fig. 7)* embodies in many respects an attitude exactly opposite that of Holzer's *Sign on a Truck*. Rosler does not rely on an unfathomable domain of political common sense in her audiences but, quite to the contrary, confronts the viewer/listener with the seemingly unbearable request to pay attention for sixty-one minutes to the kind of political information and historical detail that the American television viewer or newspaper reader is never exposed to. Thus, Rosler gives her viewers a sense of the *labor of representation,* the labor necessary to disentangle fragments of knowledge and sociopolitical truth from the totality of myth and ideology that constitutes the nature of daily experience. Rosler seems to have learned this approach from the filmmakers Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, who also demand from the viewer participation in the laborious reconstruction of consciousness and historical experience in an immensely delayed observation process.

This delay, committed as much to the construction of memory and consciousness as to the material analysis of the political reality of the present moment, originates in a careful distinction between the representation and the materiality of history. In the same manner as Huillet and Straub (and in the
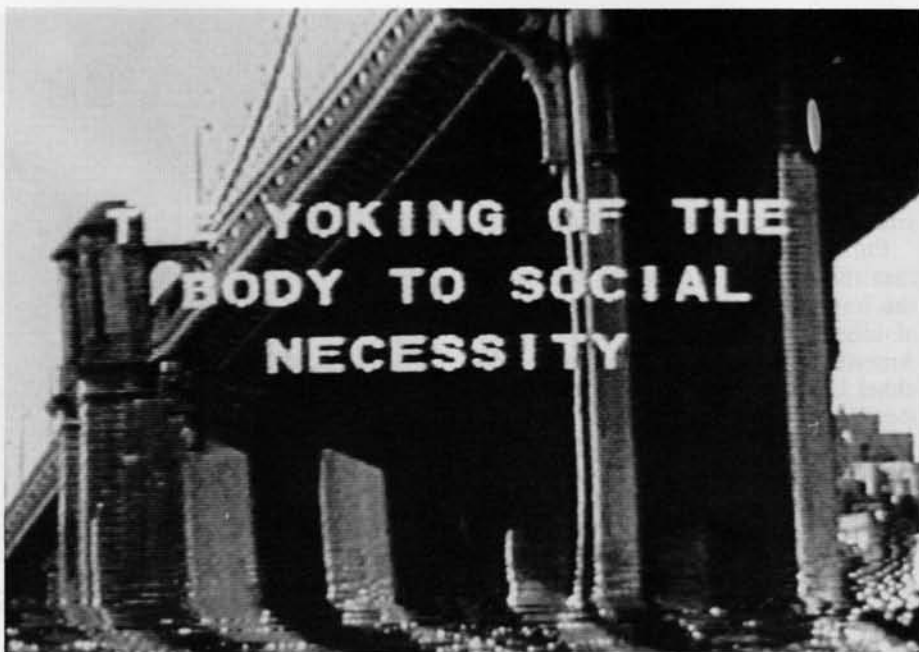

Fig. 7 Martha Rosler, still from *A Simple Case for Torture*, 1983.

way suggested by Bertolt Brecht) Rosler engages the viewers in the parallel labors of dialectical examination: to imbue the raw facts of history with theoretical insight and to anchor the theoretical knowledge in factual history. This approach provokes in the viewers an intensity of resistance and deferral by which they can gauge the degree to which myth and ideology (and the low and short attention span in which these have trained their perceptual and innervative system) have become constitutive parts of their personality. To what extent we depend on the comfort of distortion that ideology employs by providing us with a "natural" selection of interested facts that confirm the legitimacy of the views and conditions within which we are held becomes obvious in the confrontation with Rosler's slow-moving and didactic tape. It is precisely against this "naturalness" of ideology that Rosler's most recent videotape works on the viewer in a manner that is adequate to the subject of torture. If successful (i.e., if the viewers actually develop the patience that is necessary to watch this often repetitive and litany-like presentation), the work can also develop a different kind of resistance: one that gives the viewer almost a physiological aversion to be further subjected to the naturalization of ideology, to the depoliticization of history, and to the growing deprivation and withdrawal of actual political information in everyday life that generate the conditions of a collective state of anomie and amnesia.

It is quite appropriate therefore that Rosler's tape on torture begins with the reproduction of a William Bailey painting on the cover of *Newsweek* carrying

the headline "Art imitates life," an image showing us a bare-breasted young woman (*Portrait of S.*) who has been forced by the artist into a position of exposure to male scopophilia. Thus Rosler establishes instantly the historical connections that exist between this kind of ideological violence and the correlative of political reality; as she puts it: "Realism has become a word for hawks." Departing from a cultural reflection on the current rediscovery of traditional practices of representation in painting, she reveals them as the cultural forces of legitimation for a political reality that is the actual subject of her study. At the same time, she reclaims the strategies and history of Realism as the basis for her own work by emphasizing, from the start that "Realism" currently cannot simply be abandoned to the fashionable rediscovery of the traditions of figurative painting. (The "realism" of the Baileys and Fischls profits parasitically from the *myth* of a past in which painting still had a subject and a commitment to carry, a past when even Hopper could still perform some of the functions of Realism's historical program of the nineteenth century, however inadequate and insufficient the tools of the "realist" painter had obviously already become in the 1930s and 1940s—the phase to which the contemporary generation refers in cynical paraphrase and parody.) Rosler's video work engages the viewer in a reflection on the different necessities that realism currently has to confront if it wants to take the legacy of realistic practice seriously and if it wants to approach the reality of contemporary existence aesthetically. She makes it clear that primarily this

contemporary realism is involved in the analysis of the common practices of mediating and managing consciousness/representations—a field in which art can be uniquely competent, much more so certainly than in a direct interference with political realities (or anonymous audiences' voting decisions).

Phrased in a paradox, one could argue that the referent of Rosler's realism is the impervious and elusive materiality of ideology. For this, an essay by an American philosophy professor, Michael Levin, published under the heading "My Turn" in the pages of *Newsweek* serves as a striking example, and it constitutes the key document in Rosler's examination. In this essay, Levin argues for the legalization of torture and its application under certain extreme circumstances that he invents, with revealingly outrageous fantasies (e.g., a man holding Manhattan hostage with an atomic bomb). Rosler goes almost line for line through this contemporary document (its peculiar language formation of the neoconservative of the Reagan era will require additional attention by language analysts) and juxtaposes the wild paranoid fantasies of the philosopher about a peaceful American society of mothers and children that is surrounded by terrorists to the actual realities of the "real terror network" of the American-supported-and-directed terrorism in Central and Latin America. The philosopher's fantasies of the Manhattan mother whose child is held hostage by an atom-bomb-swinging terrorist (the kind of situation, the philosopher argues, where a legal basis for state-authorized torture would be required) is confronted in Rosler's tape with the realities of hundreds and thousands of women in Central and Latin America who have actually lost their sons to torturers and death squads or have themselves been subjected to torture by the US-backed regimes of Chile, El Salvador, and Guatemala, or the Nicaraguan *contras*. At no point are the viewers left in doubt about the artificiality of the construction that they are watching (or about the well-researched facticity of the information that this construction conveys).

Employing strategies of defamiliarization that are very effective in confronting the viewers with the necessity of reconstructing consciousness and of understanding political reality for themselves at every given moment, Rosler demonstrates that it cannot be the videotape's function to operate as a one-time aesthetical substitute for the continuous labor of representation-construction. Layers of information (such as simultaneous voice-over, character-generated rolling textual information,

Fig. 8 Martha Rosler, still from *A Simple Case for Torture,* 1983.

and visual imagery) are compressed often into an almost inextricable network that clearly does not consider a didactic agitprop approach as its only mode of operation or trust the straightforward "documentation" of political and historical facts (a task that a video work would be uniquely qualified to fulfill). Frequently, the overwhelming impact of the factual information presented is countered with calm panning shots along the Manhattan skyline or across the stacks of books providing the historical, political, and theoretical information that has entered or determined the tape. These apparently "meaningless" images, in their rhythmic recurrence, not only structure the viewers' attention into phases of confrontation with an overload of information and phases of a visual relief but return the role of the active, productive part in the construction of the representation itself to the viewer as an explicit suggestion to confront the apparent mutability of a monolithic reality with the efforts necessary to its comprehension. These devices (again reminiscent of Huillet and Straub's techniques, as, for example, in their *History Lessons'* traveling shots of Rome) grow in intensity by their simple repetition and ultimately assume metaphoric qualities in which the difficulty and the necessity to represent political reality at all in an aesthetic construction are reflected in a dialectic of speechless facticity and artless knowledge.

In some instances the tape's constructed artificiality (as opposed to what could easily be misperceived as an attempt at a political documentary) is

even more emphatically pronounced: we see Rosler play with toy tanks that she runs across and over a pile of books, for example, and, most poignantly, someone's fingertips shuffle a tiny, awkwardly cut crown of gold paper across the portrait photograph of the philosopher who advocated in *Newsweek* the legalization of torture, trying to place it on his head *(Fig. 8)*. This striking image, which seems to have emerged directly out of Benjamin's reflections on the loss of reason under the weight of power, crowns the philosopher who has prostituted his discipline to the unconditional support of ruling-class power with the fool's cap. At the same time, this image is so haunting in its grotesque qualities of shrunken and miniaturized artifice that it instantly reminds us of another condition: in current artistic production, any element that reclaims access to the imagery of the myth or the high-cultural past is not associating itself with the meaning that these myths and art practices might have once had, but pledges allegiance to the economic and political powers that are now barricaded behind the defense of the cultural legacy of history and "civilization."

The torturous length of Rosler's tape, along with the barrage of information that it releases in highly condensed acoustical and visual structures as well as—and most likely this is the strongest feature still—the actual historical and political information that the tape conveys, makes the viewer return to reality after sixty-one minutes in a frame of mind that invites not an easy reconciliation but rather an irritation that recognizes the same ideological mechanisms

to be operative in every daily detail. It depends on the viewers, obviously, to what tasks they put their newly won discomfort in reality and the defamiliarization from its all-encompassing totality.

Unlike Rosler's previous video work *Secrets from the Street,* which was much more specific in its address of a downtown San Francisco audience (where the tape was shot and subsequently exhibited in a community center), *A Simple Case for Torture* does not address a particular audience (other than its obvious first audience, the educated middle class). In a public installation (such as the tape's first showing at the Whitney Biennial in 1983), this most complicated and lengthy of Rosler's video works to date is bound to lose large parts of its audience very quickly (certainly the meditative paint gazers first). This seems to be the really problematic aspect of Rosler's tape, and in a way the opposite problem of Jenny Holzer's populist installation. What Holzer's work lacked in complexity and political specificity, in factual information that could actually provide a moment of public counterinformation, Roslers supplies to such a degree that it is almost inevitable that the tape will not hold its audience for more than fifteen minutes at the most (many people during the Whitney installation walked away much sooner than that). This seems to suggest only that Rosler is unaware that people who visit an exhibition might simply be unable to sit in front of a video monitor for more than thirty minutes; we cannot assume that it indicates a reluctance on Rosler's part to tackle the seemingly unresolvable conflict between the construction of consciousness and the construction of new audiences in contemporary aesthetic practice.

Notes

This article was completed in December 1984.

1 For a documentation of Gerry Schum's activities and the videotapes that he produced, see: *Gerry Schum,* exh. cat. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1982.

2 Richard Serra's *Television Delivers People* is documented in the catalogue *Castelli-Sonnabend Video Tapes and Films.* New York, 1974, p. 191. For a discussion of the videotapes and films by Richard Serra, see: Annette Michelson, Richard Serra, and Clara Weyergraf, "An Interview," *October,* 10 (Fall 1979).

3 Dan Graham's video works have been collected in his book, *Video-Architecture-Television,* The Nova Scotia Series, Halifax/New York, 1979.

4 See: Robert Pincus-Witten, "Theater of the Conceptual," and "Vito Acconci and the Conceptual Performance," *Postminimalism,* New York, 1977, pp. 186 ff. and 143 ff.

5 Graham (cited n. 3), pp. 63 ff.

6 Ibid., pp. 72 ff.

7 Dan Graham's videotape *Rock My Religion* was produced by the Moderna Museet Stockholm in 1982. Various essays by Dan Graham discuss the project in detail. See: "Rock Religion," *Artists Architecture,* exh. cat. Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 1983, pp. 80 f.; and *Dan Graham,* exh. cat., Kunsthalle Bern, 1984, passim.

8 See: Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," *Modernism and Modernity,* Halifax, 1983, pp. 215 ff.

9 For an extensive discussion of Birnbaum's earlier work, see my essay "Appropriation and Montage: Allegorical Procedures in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* (September 1982), pp. 43 ff.

10 A complete listing of the participating artists in Holzer's project was published in *Art in America* (January 1985), p. 88.

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