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### **Inter/Actions? Staging the Self and Medialization in Bruce Nauman, Joan Jonas, and Vito Acconci**

From the mid-1960s, the performances and actions of artists such as Bruce Nauman, Joan Jonas, and Vito Acconci increasingly made use of a new medium that soon came to play a central role: video. The works of art in question can neither be conceived nor produced without video. The deliberately self-reflexive use of the medium of video and an interest in the technical dispositives of recording are important here. In this essay, we will therefore argue that technical media like video, used in the context of significant areas of performance art, do not serve to reproduce or document the various performances, but rather are fundamental to the practice of (re)presentation within production aesthetics. The artists interact with the media dispositives, with the technical, social, and aesthetic factors pertaining to the medium, and their performances consist of the reflexive presentation of this interaction. Employing this initially heuristic concept of interactivity, central characteristics of the use of the media in the context of performance and video art in the 1960s and 1970s will be analyzed. Our understanding of interaction is not identical to the traditional concept of interaction, which denotes the relationship between medium and public particularly in the context of the use of computers and also in the realm of installation art. In the works by Nauman, Jonas, and Acconci, we argue, (inter)action stands at the forefront between the artist and the medium—this interaction is the performance. In the following we will investigate

whether this interaction between artist and medium, in this case video, is a form of artistic conception and self-reflection, and also if this interaction can be understood as an artistic strategy that aims to break open and transcend traditional genre definitions and conditions of production and aesthetics.

"Initially the immediacy of video's medium interested me."<sup>11</sup> If these words of Bruce Nauman were interpreted as a programmatic statement on his work with the new medium since the mid-1960s, seeing him appealing to the directness of the replay of his actions as the sole aesthetic quality, then this would be an unfairly limited reading. Nauman's work with his body, which he undertook especially in minimalist actions, characterizes a complex use of the media that cannot be imagined without an interactive dimension. Since the mid-1960s, Nauman concentrated on single sections of the body and monotonously repeating movements, as in works like *Lip Sync* (1969) or *Bouncing Balls* (1969). This reduction accentuates his interest in sculptural and object-like effects, whereby the medium of video occupies a key function in the realization of a formal aesthetic. Writing on the use of video in the *closed circuit* installation, Rosalind Kraus noted as early as 1976: "One could say that if the reflexivity of modernist art is a doubling or doubling back in order to locate the object (and thus the objective conditions of one's experience), the mirror reflection of absolute feedback is a process of bracketing out the object."<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy here that the image medium plays a decisive role in the evocation of object effects. In this sense, Nauman's use of video turns out to be the central element of his artistic conception: it is video that makes it possible to stage the body as a moving object in space, with the movements following primarily formal principles—up, down, left, right, lively, dead, material, immaterial, etc. This is how Nauman describes the strictly calculated movements in his video *Wall-Floor-Positions* (1968): "Standing with my back to the wall for about forty-five seconds or a minute, leaning out from the wall, then bending at the waist, squatting, sitting and finally lying down. There were seven different positions in relation to the wall and floor. Then I did the whole sequence again standing away from the wall, facing the wall, then facing left and right. There were twenty-eight positions and the whole presentation lasted about half an hour."<sup>13</sup> The sketched-out principles of order and choreographed movements lead to image sequences that also have a sculptural effect.

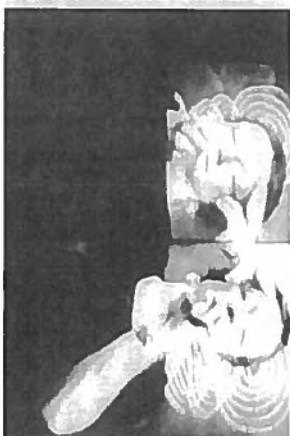


Bruce Nauman, *Wall Floor Positions*, 1968  
16mm film, b&w  
Photo: MUMOK, Rastl/Denhardtstein

In *Slow Angle Walk* (*Beckett Walk*) (1968), which follows on a similar basic conception, Nauman produces a particular effect through the positioning of the camera. It is placed upside-down, or turned by 90 degrees, and records the artist over approximately sixty minutes, as he walks with his arms behind his back and his legs thrust forward on a square drawn on the floor, alternating between bending his torso down or leaning back. The camera position determines the perception of the space and the movements, and leads to the impression that the artist is walking on the wall. The camera eye shifts and alienates the usual dimensions of up and down and determines the perceptual framework of what is shown. The starting point of Nauman's actions with the body is therefore actually an impossible spatial situation, whereby the staged movements are performed by means of a simple video special effect. The movements again follow a strict and meticulously planned choreography. In Nauman's words: "The body then falls forward onto the raised foot and the other leg is lifted to again make a straight line with the body (which now forms a T over the support leg). The body swings upright with the non-support leg swinging through the vertical and into the 90-degree position, as at the beginning. Three steps turn to the right and then three step-turns to the left will advance you two paces—each three steps advances you one step."<sup>14</sup> What is notable here is that Nauman combines a formal structuring principle with a minimalist conception. This takes place on the basis of a performative use of the body, which is staged as moving sculpture, with the use of the image medium transforming the materiality and the plasticity of the body into an object-

like figure. The particular shift in accent that Nauman's use of the medium of video implies becomes clear: it is not the direct action and the physical presence of the body that are in the foreground, but rather its representation in an image, or, more precisely, its transformation. Unlike a traditional sculpture, which is characterized by a lack of movement or stasis, Nauman's body sculptures are made dynamic and set in motion by the media properties of video, in particular its process-based and temporal means of recording. In other words: the body of the actor performs calculated movements that possess the status of an object and are recorded and replayed as sequences of images by the medium of the video. The material presence of the work of art is replaced by the media representation. What really matters, therefore, is that video works less as a reproducing and representing medium, but rather makes it possible for Nauman to implement his artistic strategy. More than that: his artistic practice and aesthetic conception are entirely based on the media dispositive of this visual recording machine. The concept of interaction must thus be further defined as an open circulation of various dimensions of artistic practice, including the performative use of the body, a sculptural language of image, and the technical conditions of the medium of the video, none of which can be separated out from the others, as they all relate to each other in mutual interdependence.

Around 1970, the performance artist Joan Jonas purchased a portable video camera (Sony Portapak) and began to develop performances for and in front of the video camera. *Left Side Right Side* (1972) is one of the first works to address questions of identity, gender, and perception in this medium. As has been shown in some detail, this work was strongly influenced by feminism and psychoanalysis, including Jacques Lacan's theoretical work on the ego-consciousness and the mirror stage. The artist places a mirror and a monitor next to each other and takes up her position in front of them. A camera films her face and shows the pictures on the monitor, while a second camera, placed behind Jonas, films both her face in the mirror and the monitor at the same time. During the entire video the recordings shift between the perspective of the first camera and the second, doubled perspective. *Left Side Right Side* is seen as a key work of the experimental use of the new medium of video, even if its approach is rather formal and extremely reduced. In a further sequence in this work an additional element is added to the reduced gestures, and here too the issue is the ability to see double. Jonas draws labyrinthine patterns on a board,



Joan Jonas, *Left Side Right Side*, 1972  
Video, b&w, sound, 8 min 50 sec  
Courtesy of the artist

which appear via mirroring and recording by the monitor in alternating configurations now on the left and then on the right of the video screen.

In *Vertical Roll* (1972) Jonas continues her experimental investigation of the medial dispositive of video in the 1970s, taking a new approach. This work concentrates on a specific technical feature of the medium; Jonas experiments with a technical setting error of video that makes the picture "roll" on, so that rolling stripes continually appear on the screen and disturb the continuity of the sequence of images. Technically, as Jonas notes, this works as follows: "A vertical roll results from two out-of-sync frequencies, the frequency signal sent to the monitor and the frequency by which it is interpreted."<sup>5</sup> The rhythm of the roll is accentuated in the circa 17 minute tape by a staccato-like beat, a kind of metallic banging noise. The limits of the video image become apparent, both in its being within a "box" and in the temporal dimension of linear process, and Jonas uses these structural properties of the medium to deconstruct and stage the image of her own body. The fragmentation of the video image by the distorted image format makes it possible to represent the body itself as fragmented and artificially assembled. The video consists of seven parts in all, with portraits of the artist's face as the opening and closing sequences. At the beginning, Jonas' face is moving against the direction of the vertical roll, upwards from the lower edge of the screen, until it comes to occupy the entire screen and a hand also becomes visible—the hand that is striking out the metallic beat on a hard surface. The following sequences are all introduced by fades. First the body of a masked woman in satin trousers and a



Joan Jonas, *Vertical Roll*, 1972  
Video, b&w, sound, 19 min 30 sec  
Courtesy of the artist

bustier is recognizable—the same figure that we recognize as “Organic Honey” from an earlier Jonas work of that name. The figure moves from a sitting to a reclining position, a movement that is continually interrupted by the contrary movement of the vertical roll. This opposition leads to distortion of the image and of perception, which is intensified in the third part of the tape. A static image of a seated naked woman is rotated by 90 degrees, giving it an illusory effect as if she were changing her position. Vertical roll is not only used to manipulate the movements in the image, but also to create a montage of parts of the body, such as a pair of legs that seems to be cut off from the body and hopping independently. The same is true of the images of the torso, which is seen flimsily dressed and turning around its own axis. Here the distortion caused by vertical roll is intensified by the increasing lack of focus of the image.

This video stages a withdrawal—the denial of a coherent visibility of the female body. It is our contention that this does not primarily take place so as to prevent voyeuristic reception, but rather in resistance to an attitude of reception that is known in film theory as “suture.” This concept denotes technically evoked illusionistic identification with what is shown, which is achieved particularly through the impression of coherence and closure. Jonas’ work displays a formal aesthetic interest in a new representation of movements that undermines the conventional perception of moving images. She thereby fills in an intermediate space between synchronous image sequence and the fixed and motionless image, between revealing and hiding the body and its masked representation, between the availability

and the withdrawal of what is shown. This liminal basic feature of the video can be seen as the real point of reference to a performative aesthetic. And this although the action or performance that leads to the recordings is subordinated to this aesthetic aim of staging images or sequences of images. The female body is staged by Jonas’ alienated moving image, with a changed and extended scope for action. The space where this action takes place is the virtual, technically manipulated space that is provided by the medium of video. The work is therefore not based on the aesthetic premise of a discreet and direct materiality or body that the technical medium records but cannot adequately reproduce, but rather precisely an explicit (inter)action of the bodily actions with technical conditions and possibilities. It is only the technical dispositive that creates the extended space for movement and therefore also representation. This facilitates the extension of the action and creates alternative possibilities of visualizing bodily movements. The space of media representation is structured by the formal principle of the serial roll and a technical alienation effect that constitutes the tension between the visibility and invisibility of the bodily whole.

In Jonas’ *Vertical Roll* the fixable surface of an image of the body is dissolved so as to make visible the borders that thereby become both perceivable and at the same time are also transcended. In this manner, the image space of the video becomes a playful space that has no prescribed outer border, permitting acts of transgression and displacement to the degree that the parameters of the staging of the self are weakened and an autonomous aesthetic value of the images takes over. This means that those aspects of self-staging and self-mirroring that are often emphasized, and with them the exploration of artistic or female identity, are in fact not the main issue in this work. Here, in contrast to the classical mirror situation, video is not used primarily as a monitor of the staging of a self-image or portrait, but as a medium of the production of alternating moving images of the body. This medialization of aesthetic strategy should not be confused with a trend toward de-subjection, but amounts to the implementation of an artistic concept that attempts to intimately combine theatrical actions with the production of images. The continuous challenge to and breaking through the spatial borders of the frames, and the imitations posed by the physical screen, corresponds to this. This transgression of the prescribed image space and the displacement of a coherent image of the body take place so as to create bodily fragments that literally get out of line. The

internal borders of the viewer's perspective are thereby also displaced and their traditional function is rendered ineffective. Jonas' video *Vertical Roll* realizes a staging of the body as withdrawal and at the same time as a literal stepping outside the role/roll.

Since the late 1960s, Vito Acconci used film and video not only to document his performances, but also soon began to use video independently, concentrating on interaction with the audience. Acconci's interest in behavioral psychology led him to investigate human interaction in space, the borders and dynamics of which he aimed to consider and present artistically in what he called "performance areas" and "power fields." The question to be considered in the following concerns the degree to which interaction with the audience takes place via interaction with the dispositive of video, and the conditions and potential of the medium, and—so our thesis—thereby exhausts itself and is even partly transcended.

In the video *Theme Song* (1973), and in a similar way in *Turn On* (1974), Acconci attempts to run against and question the limits of the screen by employing two key means—the camera adjustment and the use of the voice. He wishes to break through the frame and the limitations of the screen. The aim is not only to intensify face-to-face communication or to maximize proximity with the viewer, but to break through the pictorial space, playing to the full a game with the conditions of the medium and its means of representation. First the qualities of the medium of video and its dialectic of the presence and absence of the physical performer are tested. Acconci's cliché-like attempts to gain the favor of the viewers are performed against the background of lines from songs by Bob Dylan, the Doors, and other pop music, which he plays back from time to time from a cassette recorder. At first the specific meaning of the video seems to lie in the fact that the viewer is directly looked at and spoken to. The lines that open the monologue run: "I can't see your face in my mind. ... Of course I can't see your face. I have no idea what your face looks like. Somebody anybody out there, but there's gotta be somebody watching me. Somebody who wants to come in close to me. ... Come on, I'm all alone ... I'll be honest with you, O.K. I mean you'll have to believe me if I'm really honest. ..." The failed attempt to break through the dividing line between the realms of production and reception cements the cliché of the impossibility of direct communication and indicates the unavoidable self-referentiality of the monologue. In her influential essay "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,"



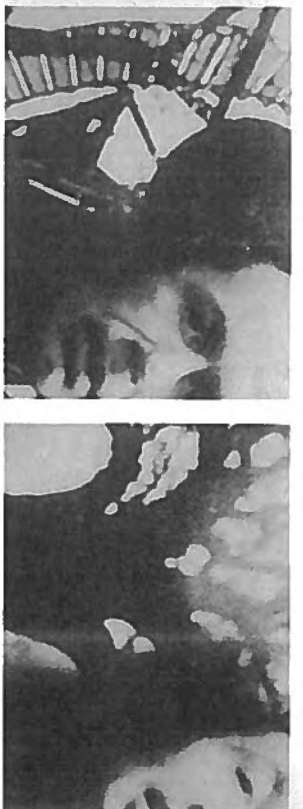
Vito Acconci, *Theme Song*, 1973  
Video, b&w, sound, 30 min  
Courtesy of the artist, © Vito Acconci

mentioned above, Rosalind Kraus describes this self-referentiality using Vito Acconci's video *Centers* (1971) as a characteristic of early video art.<sup>6</sup> The self-referentiality is not the manifestation of any ostentatious communication with the audience, but rather the distrust and rejection of the ability of the symbolic system of language to engender meaning and its ability to take effect interactively.

In his *Some Notes on My Use of Video* (1974) Acconci writes: "I can push up against the screen as if to throw myself on the viewer as if to fight the neutrality of the situation, push myself through." The attempt to stage the transgression of the borders of the image takes place mainly with close-ups, showing Acconci lying on the ground, with his face as close as possible to the camera and slightly distorted by the wide-angle recording. The close-up or medium shot are frequently used to show portrait or close views of the artist, in many of which the head appears out of proportion to the body, particularly to the legs. The central element of the video is an intimate address to the audience. Acconci speaks directly to the viewer with a deep voice, and begins a monologue that is intended to make him seem seductive and irresistible. The self-staging thus derives its key interactive dynamics from the combination of visual and audio elements. Acconci makes the fullest use of the media conditions of his use of the voice; hearing, like sight, is a sense that works over distance, but, unlike sight, it would seem that it is not a sense that provides distance but rather involvement and participation. The human voice differs from mere sounds in that it has a specific appellative character, always directed to some other; it wishes to

be heard and answered with words or actions. The mediated voice, divorced from the body, leaving time and space behind it at will, nonetheless appeals to the listening subject, but now under quite different conditions of communication. In Acconci's video this opens up an irritating connection between intimacy and publicity, proximity and distance, intensity and reflection.

The work *The Red Tapes* (1976–77) is a video with these key elements, whereby the artist explores his own identity through references to American history. He constructs a rich poetic text that dominates the entire work. *The Red Tapes* develops a complex amalgam of narrative elements, photographic images, music, and spoken language. Here too the carefully staged transgression of symbolic framings and medial methods is important. The video is divided into three chapters, and the sequences of images are structured as an arrangement of spatial configurations, but the central structural element of this work over 140 minutes is the voice. Acconci writes on this: "The method of the tape is the alteration of blank screen and image; when the screen is blank (when the screen is gray, neutralized), there is an undercurrent of voice—voice breaks into language, language breaks into image, gray fades into picture."<sup>7</sup> A structural constant is given in the alternation between a gray screen and visual sequences, with the voice corresponding to the gray screen. The image sequences and the gray screen and the voice thus constantly alternate. Acconci's video thereby emphasizes the relationship between what one sees and what one hears, staging the voice as acousmatic, as a sound that is heard but whose source (in this case the speaker) is not seen.<sup>8</sup> The acousmatic voice is a seemingly unlimited, omnipotent, or even omniscient voice, which is so effective and fascinating because it appeals to the imagination of the listeners and introduces a further visual dimension into the perception of the video. The rhythmic structure or image sequence and voice determine the perception of the video, even if what is shown does not appear to actually reinforce this. In *Red Tape I: Common Knowledge* the thematic focus is on the exploration of the self (Acconci is shown in close-up); a landscape is represented by a photographic image, and the voice articulates a mysterious story. *Red Tape 2: Local Colour* is essayistic and analytical; the camera perspective is broader and is seen as a body in the context of architectonic and sculptural spaces. Here too the difference in the use of the voice is crucial. Acconci notes: "Whereas the voice in *Tape I* was novelistic, the voice in *Tape II* is essayistic:



Vito Acconci, *The Red Tapes*, 1976–1977  
Video, b&w, sound, 140 min  
Courtesy of the artist, © Vito Acconci

the language attempts to formulate a grammar, establish rules, sets itself up as an analyzer." *Tape 3: Time Lag* shows a theatrical space, in which Acconci and a number of actors perform scenes from a "rehearsal of America," with a broad range of themes from the autobiographical to the social and references to literature, psychoanalysis, cinema, art, and popular culture. *Red Tapes* is therefore an extraordinary testimony of the 1970s in which Acconci attempts to determine a stance within the mythical discourses of American culture and society.

The emphasis here is, however, not on the communicative and referential function of language and signs, but rather on the role of the voice beyond symbolic and logocentric systems. It is significant that the voice is deep, sonorous, and rather rough, as its expressive value beyond any semiotic function becomes the central location for the physical presence of the artist. It guarantees the materiality of his body, and, as Roland Barthes wrote in his essay "The Grain of the Voice," "it has us hear a body which has no civil identity, no 'personality,' but which is nevertheless a separate body," doing this as "movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages."<sup>9</sup> This voice gives the absent body medial presence and suggests physical contact. Video thus offers the possibility of perceiving voice in pictorial space as more than just the carrier of the staging of the self, going beyond that to achieve a direct relationship to the body of the performer and the physical binding of the viewer to the visual sequences. This is less a question of the effect of the illusion of direct experience and the presence of the body, than an interplay of visual and audio

dimensions that can be explained as having the function of an index. The voice in this video works as an indexical indication of the body of the performer. It is that mark and trace that points to the direct presence of this physicality and fixes it as an imprint in the visual sequences. The deliberate use of the voice as described by the artist proves therefore to be an aesthetic strategy pertaining to the use of the medium of video. The performative staging of the self takes shape only through this relationship between physical presence and absence. In short, in this work in particular Accorci develops the connection between performance and reproductive image medium by means of the auditive dimension of the voice. The voice in the video functions as a resonating space for the images of the body and stages the key rhythmic appearance of the image spaces. The image space of the video medium thereby, as it were, opens up its surface dimension and produces an extended and deepened resonating space that aims for physical (re)presentation beyond pure visibility. This correlation between optical and acoustic means of perception ultimately also demonstrates that this is not a case of an optocentric form of perception staging the body and its visibility as a surface, but rather an understanding of the body that attempts to create an extensive resonating space for all the senses.

Notes:

- 1 Bruce Nauman, in Robert C. Morgan, "Eccentric Abstraction: From Biomorphic Sensualism to Hard-Edge Concreteness," *Flash Art* 144 (1989), p. 77.
- 2 Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October*, no. 1 (1976), p. 57.
- 3 Bruce Nauman, in Willoughby Sharp, "Nauman Interview," *Arts Magazine* 44 no. 5 (1970), p. 26.
- 4 Nauman, in Coosje van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman*, New York 1988, p. 115.
- 5 Joan Jonas, in David Ross, *Joan Jonas, Scripts and Descriptions*, Berkeley 1983, p. 74.
- 6 Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," in *October*, no. 1 (1976), reprinted in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology*, New York 1978, pp. 43–64.
- 7 Vito Accorci, cited from: <http://www.eai.org/eai/tape:jsf?itemID=1359>.
- 8 On the acousmatic voice see Michel Chion, *La voix au cinéma*, Paris 1992.
- 9 Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text*, New York 1997, p. 182 and p. 181.

Michaela Pöschl

**Otto Muehl, Kurt Kren: Cum Shot Asses and Assholes**

"Da hab' ich alle Verhältnisse abg'streift"

If viewers are to be given the power of seemingly all-seeing, all-knowing voyeurs, a film must obey certain rules: films should (in the main) do without all elements that disrupt their own illusion of reality; viewers should read the moving images as a reproduction of reality. In other words, the medium of film represents various codes that are intended to be accepted as a reproduction of the conditions for perceiving reality.

Body art and the representation of body art in film very often propagate the body of the artist as "naked truth." Here too, a long chain of substitutes opens up *behind* this truth, behind an unambiguous "That's the way it is." The American art historian Amelia Jones describes these representatives as "The sequence of supplements initiated by the body art project the body 'itself', the spoken narrative, the video and other visuals within the piece, the film, photograph, text and video documenting it for posterity announces the necessity of an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, or original perception.' (...) Body and performance art expose the contingency of the body/self not only on the other of the communicative exchange (the audience, the art historian) but on the very modes of its own (re)presentation."<sup>2</sup> It is the "apostrophes" embodied by films, videos, photos and texts that produce precisely that which they have apparently taken from the live