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## Performance, Video, and Trouble in the Home

KATHY O'DELL

A television producer recently said to me that he thought *The Honeymooners* was the first video art piece ever made. Initially, the comment struck me as glib. But every time I came back to the prescribed content of this essay—early seventies "performance-based video"<sup>1</sup> and its relations to sixties performance art—along came that silly comment, begging for attention. Images of Alice, Ralph, Trixie, and Norton flooded my mind: Ralph trying to protect his home from armed intruders by bombastically brandishing a water pistol; Norton teaching Ralph to dance so that Alice wouldn't be attracted to the young, single dance instructor who had just moved into the building; Ralph loudly admonishing Alice for never "standing behind him" on his harebrained schemes and Alice icily responding, "I'd love to, Ralph, but there's not much room back there."

While these memories were pleasurable, I was hardly convinced they constituted the ancestral roots of video art, and furthermore, my mission was not to enter into a genealogical hunt. Then something struck me about *The Honeymooners*—a certain sort of "trouble in the home," the sort that was of interest to me in the work I was exploring. The trouble in the Kramdens' home was that they rarely left it, and this was the paradoxical crux of the series—although they called themselves the "honeymooners," we never saw them on their honeymoon and whenever they tried to take a vacation (the equivalent of a second honeymoon), the car would break down, Ralph would get hooked into a shady real estate deal on a summer cabin, and so forth. Typical of fifties television agendas, we were meant to believe that the Kramdens were on an extended honeymoon in their marriage, stabilized in and by the home site, which doubled as a holiday site.<sup>2</sup> Atypical, however, was that this holiday was no picnic. With Ralph reverse-stereotyped as "female" hysteric and Alice as "male" rationalist, trouble was constantly brewing. Now, this reversed stereotyping, which could be so easily re-reversed, did not represent any great stride forward in the history of male-female social relations, but in the context of the 1950s, the fact that the notion of gender could be reconstructed at all was a small, significant step.

I am more interested, however, in the subtler psychohistorical implications of *The Honeymooners*. First, since the home was shown as the site of gender's reconstruction, it was suggested that the home is also the site of its *original* construction—a process shown to be problematic by the Kramdens' desire to reverse it. Second, since it was evident that this thing called television was mediating our own subjective positions in the home from which we watched

(that is to say, *The Honeymooners* never fooled us into thinking we were looking in on a picture of our own homes—for one thing, neither the Kramdens nor the Nortons had kids), we could understand that subjecthood overall is mediated, that it is constructed through the difference-forming tendencies of representation. And third, Ralph's weighty presence called visual attention to the locus of psychological work from which identifications are formed—the human body.

The body, the psychologized drama in which its representations are perceived, and the institutions (often homelike and/or holidaylike) which frame those representations are the issues discussed in this essay. Evoked in the 1950s by such television shows as *The Honeymooners*, these issues explode in the 1960s and 1970s in related media like performance and video. The body becomes the chief material of these art forms, brought up close to viewers, often pushing its way aggressively into their space. "There's not much room back there," as Alice said, but what space there is—behind and around the performing body—is far from neutral.

The institutions in which performance and video were presented in the early 1970s—ranging from galleries to schools, from proto-alternative spaces to alternative spaces—were heavily coded with psychological familiarities rotating around the construct of the family. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his theorizations upon Rabelais's writings on sixteenth-century carnival, has suggested that the modern parallel to the sixteenth-century opposition between the state (as power) and carnival (as mixed-up power) is the opposition between home and holiday.<sup>3</sup> For argument's sake, we shall consider the space of the gallery, with dealers functioning as maternal or paternal figures, to be comparable to the home venue; alternative spaces as comparable to the holiday space; and proto-alternative spaces and schools, in which the bulk of early seventies works took place, as a curious mix of the two. The performance-based videos of Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Joan Jonas, and others touch on all the issues mentioned above, leading us to question the stability of the institutions in which the artists' work was situated and the institution toward which the viewers' attention was directed. Was there, after all, "trouble in the home"?

Perhaps no other piece from the early 1970s more thoroughly spells out the psychologized drama engendered by performance-based video than Acconci's *Claim* (1971). Blindfolded, seated in a basement at the end of a long flight of stairs, armed with metal pipes and a crowbar, threatening to swing at anyone who tried to come near, Acconci simultaneously invited and prohibited every visitor to the 93 Grand Street loft to descend into the world of the unconscious. As he spoke without ceasing, spoke repetitiously, spoke in excess ("I don't want anybody down here with me. . . . I'll keep anyone from com-

ing down the stairs. . . . I'll keep anyone from coming down here with me. . . ."), he emphatically enacted the move from what Jacques Lacan calls the "imaginary" to the "symbolic." In the latter, according to Lacan, language serves as a method of representation by which the subject claims identity after being forced to separate from an imagined identification with the mother (or equivalent figure). This separation—which, in Freudian terms is brought to conclusion in the oedipal scenario—is enforced by an intervention on the part of the father (or equivalent figure) whose phallic presence signifies territorial rights to the mother.<sup>4</sup> What interests me here has less to do with actual mothers or fathers (i.e., I am not about to conduct a biosexual reading of Acconci's, or any other artist's, work) than with the conceptualization of the body in processes of identification and what I see as a "missed chance" on the part of Acconci and the other early seventies artists we shall be discussing at recapturing a sense of unity, a sense of physical and emotional wholeness generally associated with the preoedipal.

"Identification" is a multilevel process and concerns both the viewing subject and the subject viewed. It is a popularly held notion that in performance art pieces, audience members identify with the artists through the art form's chief material—the body. This level corresponds to what Jean Laplanche, Freud's and Lacan's metacritic, has called an "identification that is both extremely early and probably also extremely sketchy . . . an identification with a form conceived of as a limit, or a sack: a sack of skin."<sup>5</sup> It is this sort of thought that sustains the belief that performance provides direct experience, as if by taking away such obvious forms of mediation as painting, sculpture, or theater scripts, the process of mediation itself is eradicated and pure experience can be forged by the knowledge of a shared possession—that fleshy sack of selfhood. However, just beyond this "extremely early" stage of psychical development and, similarly, this fundamental conception of performance pieces, identification is not so poetically simple. The next developmental level of identification, somewhat related to the "sketchy" one, occurs in what Lacan calls the "mirror stage," in which a child first discovers an image of the self.<sup>6</sup> Unlike a sketch, the reflected image seems finished and whole. But the identity-yielding image is, in actuality, split: "the very image which places the child divides its identity into two."<sup>7</sup> Thus, our perceptions of the human body—our own and others—are mediated from an early age.

Lacan defined the mirror stage as "a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic—and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire

mental development."<sup>8</sup> I suggest that the interpolation of video into performance in the early 1970s elucidates the fragmentation experienced during the mirror stage of psychical development—a fragmentation that, when focused upon, functions to betray the "orthopaedic" myth that identificatory processes totalize meanings of, or for, the subject.

To a certain extent—or, I should say, to a further extent—these concepts have already been examined by feminist film theorists and, more specifically in relation to video, by Rosalind Krauss, who so accurately concluded that "in th[e] image of self-regard is configured a narcissism . . . endemic to works of video."<sup>9</sup> Rather than step out and away from this moment of self-regard into the problematics of narcissism to which it sometimes leads, however, I would like to stay with that moment, observe how it operates for the viewing subject and subject viewed, and ultimately argue its contribution to long-range processes of identification. "Viewing subject" has more than one characterization here. Besides the person who looks into a reflecting apparatus such as a mirror, or a camera which feeds that person's image back to him or her for immediate or future use through the monitor (in *Claim*, Acconci occupies this position), there is the witness of the mirroring process. In the Lacanian configuration, this is the mother; in performance-based video, the audience. For all these individuals, however, the experience of viewing is the experience of fragmentation.<sup>10</sup>

Visitors to 93 Grand Street first viewed Acconci at the bottom of the stairs through a video monitor located outside the door at the top of the stairs. If they chose to open the door they would see the *presentation* to which the video *representation* referred. This split in experience disallowed the audience a sense of direct identification with the performer, a point that was driven home by the alienating effect of Acconci's constantly swinging metal pipe. For Acconci this effect served the purpose of "armouring," which was augmented by the wearing of the blindfold. The piece of black cloth tied tightly over the eyes not only demarcated the importance to identificatory processes of vision, which the subject ironically denies himself, but on a more mundane level, tested the ethics of the audience. Who, one might ask, would assault a "blind" man?

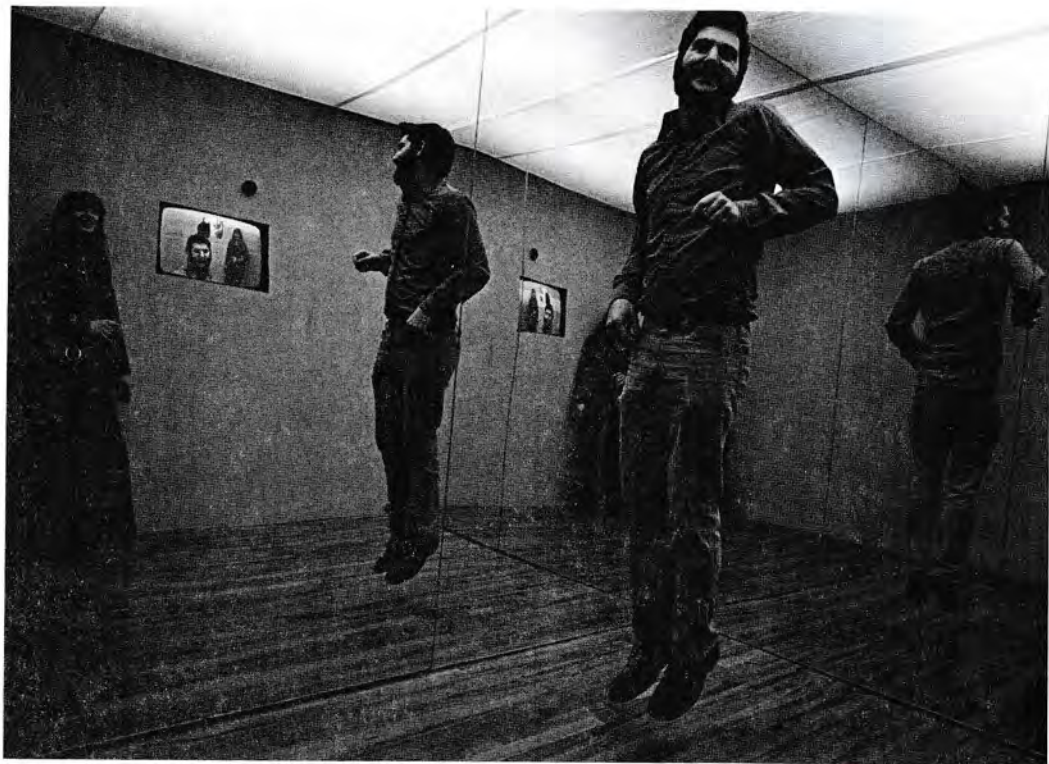
Of course, a few individuals did attempt to overtake Acconci. Occasionally the image of his body on the screen is infringed upon and then obliterated by a shadowy mass. The banging of the pipes on the wooden stairs grows in volume and regularity, a struggle can be detected, but Acconci never stops barking his possessive proclamations. Nobody succeeded in their attempts to take over his territory. Again, it was as if Acconci's "I" statements armored him, protected him from being overtaken, despite the fact that accession to the realm of the symbolic provides no more stability than does the mirror stage itself. As linguists like Benveniste have noted, the pronoun "I" works as

a shifter, only tentatively holding meaning for the person who utters it. This fact may account for the title of this piece, as Acconci lays *claim* to the territory of his unconscious—that territory that is “structured like a language”<sup>11</sup>—by continually repeating his proclamations, by not letting anyone else get a word in, by never dispossessing the “I.”<sup>12</sup>

His three-hour domination of the field of language, the splitting of his image, and the wearing of the blindfold eradicated any possibility of Acconci’s “directly” identifying with his audience. I suggest that Acconci’s choice not to identify constituted a deliberately missed chance to recreate a sense of wholeness, a choice that implicitly stated the impossibility of such a recreation. In the progression from sack of skin, to exteriorized image, to an “I,” the concept of the body as unified naturally with entities outside itself or, for that matter, within itself is revealed as just that—a concept, realizable only through illusion or myth.<sup>13</sup> Asserting this myth was the project of the 1960s, a project that was interrupted by Acconci, Graham, Jonas, and others through the use of video in performance.<sup>14</sup>

I shall expand on this comparison to the 1960s, but first, further examination of the mirror stage is needed or, rather, further discussion of artists’ work that examined it for us, for it is the very regularity of artists’ attention to its complicated aspects in the early 1970s that sparks the historian’s question of a need for such attention and the place from which the need arose. As we shall see, this attention did more than point to a mere lack of it in previous artwork; it pointed to very particular problems in the institutions around which the work was done.

By using mirrors, video monitors, and cameras in his work, Dan Graham not only demonstrated the disparity between presentation and representation and the fragmentation processes they share, as we saw Acconci do in *Claim*, but expanded the volume of disparity and fragmentation. In *Opposing Mirrors and Video Monitors on Time Delay* (1974), two monitors were placed a few feet in front of, and facing, mirrors which were positioned on walls forty feet apart. Mounted on top of the monitors and pointed in the same direction as the monitors were two video cameras, each of which was paired with the monitor on the other side of the room, set on a five-second time delay. Visitors to the space found a variety of scenarios available: a view, on the monitor, of what had happened five seconds earlier, as reflected in the mirror on the other side of the room; a view, in the mirror nearest them, of themselves and the nearby video monitor; a faraway view, in the opposite mirror, of what had occurred five seconds earlier on their own side of the room appearing now on the opposite monitor. The installation, and the self-guided performances it encouraged, provided an array of disjunctive points of view made available by mirror, monitor, and camera.<sup>15</sup>



Dan Graham, *Present Continuous Past*, 1974.

The volume of this disjunctiveness was enhanced, by way of contrast, by the layout of the installation. That is, upon entering the precisely symmetrical arrangement, with two sections structurally mirroring each other, the visitor might have been led to think that the show was about sameness of views; whereas, by performing within the installation, the visitor quickly learned that mirroring proliferates difference. This conclusion is comparable to that reached in the psychological mirror stage—the conclusion that any seemingly identical identification is, as Lacan says, a fiction, or, as Graham has shown via time delay, an image under the illusion-making influence of memory.

Graham has stated that “you only get the future by your memories of the past . . . in a certain kind of way . . . which you’re constructing in present time.”<sup>16</sup> However, this act of construction—no matter how strong an action is suggested by the verb “construct,” nor how self-consciously “constructed” Graham’s video installations and performances were—does not help stabilize identification for either the viewing subject or subject viewed. Rather, the imbrication of past, present, and future in Graham’s work signifies the very split occurring at Lacan’s mirror, a split witnessed by both the subject positioned there and the witness, who stands off to the side.

Graham explores these ideas in *Past Future Split Attention* (1972) in which

two performers (friends), holding microphones, are videotaped as they simultaneously speak, one performer describing the past experiences of his friend, while that friend describes the projected future behavior of the other. Each performer operates, clumsily, as a speaking mirror, taking up the position of "other," articulating to the person before him who he was or who he will be. It is very difficult, as a viewer of the videotape, to concentrate on the performers' speeches. Words collide, overlap, and intermittently disappear into a mélange of utterances, demonstrating how much past, present, and future data bombard us in our experience of any given moment, rendering it almost impossible to isolate a particular experience of a particular person at a particular time. But among the more decipherable statements are those at the beginning of the monologues. Interestingly, each performer begins by making reference to the other's mother: "You'll see your mother this year more than once and you'll talk to her about . . ."; "You had . . . a fairly unstable family background. . . . You were down in Brighton tonight where you . . . met your mother. . . ." <sup>17</sup> The invocation of the mother, at this moment of participating in a reconstruction of the psychodynamics of mirroring, implicates her presence as witness of the original split at the mirror and, also, bespeaks the subject's nostalgia for previous anaclitic moments in which stability was produced through leaning upon, and feeling at one with, the maternal object.

This nostalgia is stirred up in the viewer of the videotape as well, in the sense that the viewer strives to hear everything being said, tries to put all the pieces together so as to "know" the individuals on screen, attempts to stabilize the constantly shifting and splitting identifications. The attempts are futile, though not pessimistic. On the contrary, by being reminded of the way in which this moment of splitting paves the way for subsequent experience, in which this already fragmented subjectivity becomes sexually identified, engendered, constructed in language. By being led to recognize the *structural* nature of this process we are deposited on the threshold of possibility of restructuring identity. For artists like Graham or Acconci to remind us of these moments constitutes a useful reinforcement of the contributions of Lacan, whose theories suggested that by working within the structures in which gendered identifications have been formed—that is, within systems of fragmentation—we may be able to destabilize identifications ideologically determined by *biological* nature and structure new ones that would resist oppressive forms of stability.

The threshold of which I am speaking is not only figurative but also material in two senses. First, it relates to the historical position in which many individuals, especially women, found themselves in the 1970s as the first wave of 1960s women's liberation (schematically summarized here as focusing on equality through role reversal) subsided, revealing the need for deeper struc-

tural changes in the complicated, ideological workings of oppression. Since representation and the distribution of representations play key roles in the formation of ideologies, the fact that video became a useful tool for artists dealing with these feminist issues, however obliquely, is not surprising.<sup>18</sup> Second, it refers to the liminal spaces in which the video performances under discussion were actually presented and the need for institutional change prompted therein.

It should not be forgotten that video and performance had no homes of their own in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>19</sup> Artists worked in whatever space was available including, for performance artists, the outdoors. The incorporation of video into performance, however, necessitated indoor space, and artists' lofts, schools, and galleries became potentially available.<sup>20</sup> However, these various spaces did not offer the *same* potential. Something would inevitably seem "off" whenever performance, performance-based videos, or performance-and-video pieces were presented within commercial gallery spaces. Joan Jonas, for example, presented *Vertical Roll* (to be discussed shortly) at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York in 1973 but subsequently did not find such contexts, in general, ideal for the type of work she was doing at that time—partly because it had been the roughness of loft spaces that had inspired her work in the first place.<sup>21</sup> Although asked to do subsequent pieces at Castelli, Jonas declined. While this "off-ness" was indicative of the transgressive, avant-garde quality of these new forms, and while some dealers wished to be identified by this quality and therefore showcased the work, sometimes the "off-ness" was evident enough from the start, prompting them to arrange "adjunct spaces" in which artists could present performance and video work.<sup>22</sup> In 1970 John Gibson Gallery, for example, arranged for Dan Graham to conduct *TV Camera/ Monitor Performance* (in which the artist rolled back and forth on a stage while holding a video camera aimed at a video monitor located behind the audience) at the Loeb Student Center at New York University.

Performance and video work was also presented, of course, in artists' lofts like 93 Grand Street, or artist-run organizations like 112 Greene Street Workshop where the power hierarchy of the art market could be sidestepped. In some cases, like that of 112 Greene, curatorial decisions were not even made because, as founder Jeffrey Lew said, "I never understood the difference between selection and elitism."<sup>23</sup> From our historical perspective these sites could be considered proto-alternative spaces inasmuch as it would be a few more years until the term *alternative space* would be adopted by individuals running such spaces, as well as by the government agencies that would fund them.<sup>24</sup> The term *alternative* is loaded, but its complexity is useful in that it constantly forces us to look back to the institutional constructs to which the spaces attempted to contrast themselves. Although it is outside the scope of this essay to assess the degree to which alternative spaces have provided a "true" alterna-

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cal base from which such an assessment may one day, perhaps, be made.<sup>25</sup>

The straddling of these two worlds was echoed internally, as already men-  
tioned, by a straddling of the constructs of home and holiday. It's helpful now  
to turn to Bakhtin and, perhaps more helpful, to his critics. In the modern  
world, which for Bakhtin seems to date from the seventeenth century,<sup>26</sup> holi-  
day time could effect the same leveling of rule-enforcing power as carnival,  
where people of all ranks mingled, freely trafficking in self-deprecating humor,  
grotesquely altering body images through costumes and masks—where, Bakh-  
tin claimed, “all were considered equal.” Carnival, according to Bakhtin, took  
the world ruled by the hierarchies of the state and turned it “inside out,” caus-  
ing a “continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear.”<sup>27</sup> Establish-  
ing such a scenario—nonhierarchical, where caprice could blend with inten-  
tion—was the aim of artists working in proto-alternative and adjunct spaces in  
the early 1970s. But the spaces' ability to lend themselves to this project  
would always be compromised by material links back to the order of the do-  
mestic site. Artists' lofts, or workshops located in loft spaces, are still func-  
tionally coded as home space. And schools, no matter how much they encour-  
age “experimentation” (and always will in the name of academia's commitment  
to stimulating “scientific” progress), are controlled by patriarchal figures who  
clearly delineate the limits of such activity.

Creating even stronger links to home, however, were the very forms of art  
presented within these quasi-alternative spaces. It could be argued that perfor-  
mance work, with its chief materials being the human body and the psychody-  
namics attached to its reception, inevitably links us to the psychodynamics of  
the domestic site. But the introduction of video into performance work liter-  
ally drove this point home, for inherent to the operation of video is, quite  
simply, a piece of domestic furniture—the television set. The mobilization of  
this apparatus into other venues, as Acconci has argued, has profound effects  
upon the viewer:

*{T}he conventional location for a television-set is in the home; when it is come upon else-  
where, whether inside a gallery/museum or outside, in a store-window or a supermarket,  
the viewer is stopped in his/her tracks. . . . The viewer, seeing the TV set, is brought  
back home—and here, abstractly, “home” reads the way it could never be allowed to  
read when surrounded by the customs of living-room furniture: “home” means “resting-  
place”, “the final resting place”, the land of the numbl/the still/the dead.<sup>28</sup>*

Continuing with the psychoanalytic methodology I have been laying out  
in this essay, we might respond to Acconci's provocative quotation by asking:  
What is this sense of numbness and stasis other than the sense obtained in  
front of the mirror, in the home site, when the self is reflected as frozen frag-

ment? And what is the evocation of death other than the fear of disempowerment evinced by the developmental experience that follows the mirror stage—or, put more clinically, the threat of castration evoked in the oedipal scenario? If the assertions lodged in these rhetorical questions are accurate, then is it any surprise that the introduction of performance and video into galleries, with their hierarchies styled upon domestic, patriarchal models, might threaten the ideology of these hierarchies and send dealers scurrying after adjunct spaces?<sup>29</sup> After all, the traditional function of this ideology has been to link galleries just enough to the home site to assure sales to fill its interiors. What would happen if, suddenly, the *psychology* of this ideology were stirred up and it was revealed that there was trouble in the home—that is, that the gallery space was revealed to be not a home at all, but a simulacrum providing ersatz nurturing in the form of profit?

Of course, such support was only extended to the artist whose behavior was that of the “perfect child,” which, in the postwar context of *neo-avant-gardism*, could entail a smidgen of financially viable, therefore tolerated, unruliness.<sup>30</sup> Nowhere in this domain of tolerance, however, was there room for failure; for this freedom, more holidaylike spaces were sought and, interestingly, were often found(ed) with the help of those in positions of power.<sup>31</sup>

This element of secondary support became integral to the development of the “official” alternative space. Help took the form of everything from financial backing to the loaning of influential names to advisory boards (to lend clout to spaces applying elsewhere for funds). But how are we to read these efforts? Were dealers being responsive to the needs and desires of artists seeking space for their unwieldy work, or does this support qualify as a sort of permission-giving that reflexively permitted those in positions of dominant power to bolster their identity as alleged guardians of the (neo) avant-garde while simultaneously reinstating command over their own spaces and the financial security that would obtain? Related here is Natalie Zemon Davis’s analysis of the medieval phenomenon of the church’s shifting saturnalian activities (sometimes involving choir boys’ officiating burlesque masses, leading asses around the church, and so forth) to “Abbeys of Misrule.” Even the term for these medieval “alternative spaces” suggests a certain degree of permission-giving on the part of the church, which was no doubt anxious to recapture its orderly command over the sacred world but was unwilling to let go completely of the secular world over which it no doubt wanted to rule as well.<sup>32</sup>

But do these systems of patronization necessarily nullify the ability of carnivalesque spaces to offer an alternative or to stimulate change in the institutions from which they differ? Umberto Eco would say yes. He concludes, “[C]omedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions: on the contrary, they represent paramount examples of law reinforcement.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, we have all seen so-called alternative spaces evolve, virtually, into their original

opposites. However, the question of carnivalesque alternativeness and transformation is more complicated.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps we can avoid the pessimism of the foregoing conclusion by acknowledging two flaws in Bakhtin's theorization. One flaw is his implication that any system, no matter how marginal or temporary, can operate outside dominant power in the first place. Bakhtin's definitive criterion for the carnivalesque is that it constitute a "second life" suspended from the "established order" of the state. A second flaw is apparent. Bakhtin claims that any carnivalesque "escape from the usual official way of life" should yield transformative effects, but practices associated with "renewal" and "regeneration"—utopian terms lacing his text—are tightly circumscribed by the powers of nature.<sup>35</sup> In the practice of making the body grotesque, for example, bellies and/or genitals would be made to look as if they were bulging, hanging down weightily toward the ground, thus literally and figuratively enjoining the body to the natural regenerative forces of the earth. But any bridging we might expect in Bakhtin's thinking—from the conceptual transformation of the natural body to the actual transformation of the body politic—is just not there.<sup>36</sup>

Such a bridging is, of course, conceivable. A material, ongoing relationship existed between carnival and the state, as it does between the alternative space and the gallery system, or any other system that qualifies as homelike by virtue of its patriarchal, authoritative, hierarchical setup (including the government agencies, foundations, and corporations upon which alternative spaces came to depend for survival).<sup>37</sup> To understand the ramifications of this bridging we need to view the relationship between dominant and marginal institutions as symbiotic. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have suggested that "the carnivalesque was marked out as an intensely powerful semiotic realm precisely because bourgeois culture constructed its self-identity by rejecting it."<sup>38</sup> This symbiotic identificatory process—marked by the linguistic concept of "I am this because I am not that"—constitutes what I would call a "purgative mirror stage" for systems of dominant power, paradoxically reflecting its opposite while deflecting to marginal systems that which has been negated and purged.

So, even though we may have glimpsed the impossibility of alternative spaces functioning as true holiday spaces, it is important to polemicize them consistently as such, for in projecting their alternativeness they embody that which galleries, for example, thought they had purged from their systems. Stallybrass and White described this twist as the "'poetics' of transgression" which "reveals the disgust, fear and desire which inform the dramatic self-representation of the [bourgeois] culture through the 'scene of its low Other.'"<sup>39</sup> The ultimate ramification, then, of the symbiosis between the alternative space and the gallery system is that the mirroring process which establishes the latter's power simultaneously reveals its greatest points of vulnerability. The value in understanding this process is that it is through locating vulnerability that change can begin to be fostered. The precise point of vulnerability here is



Joan Jonas, *Double Lunar Dogs*, 1984.

that site of otherness known as the body—not the ideologized natural body of which Bakhtin speaks, but the socialized and psychologized body, the body-in-fragment.

Joan Jonas plays with the ontology of the body-in-fragment in her performance-based videos. Looking at her work will help us draw contrasts to sixties performance work, which, in general, is aligned with Bakhtin's outlook on medieval carnival—that is, with utopian vision. Jonas's work is paradigmatic of the early 1970s, illustrating what Bakhtin would classify as the modern, bourgeois body—"private, egotistic . . . severed from the other spheres of life," "isolated."<sup>40</sup> In *Vertical Roll* (1972), we rarely see Jonas's complete body—just her face, her hand, her belly, her legs, all seeming to operate on their own. Or, they appear to move solely with the mechanical assistance of the video apparatus. The tape begins, for example, with Jonas's head—signifier of ego—dropping slowly from the top of the frame, but its smooth move downward is interrupted by the rolling motion of the vertical hold bar, which seems to conduct an act of reverse-gravity, intermittently tugging the head



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back up toward the top of the frame. Counteracting this attempt, Jonas starts to tap the screen with a silver spoon, which makes rhythmic, but slightly out-of-synch, contact with the rolling bar. Any relation between her head and hand is ambiguous, however. As her face finally retreats off the top of the screen it is, again, as if the rolling bar, now in alliance with the tapping spoon, is responsible for pushing the head out of view. When we do see the whole body, our perception of its wholeness is disrupted by its orientation to the screen. Jonas's masked face and body, for example, are slowly eclipsed as she lifts her feet up toward the camera. As she peddles her feet toward us, they take up almost all available screen space. We are only allowed glimpses of her body, which now appears suspended from some mystical space above.

Indeed, the isolation of body parts on the screen, the appearance of the body as suspended or "sever[ed] from the material and bodily roots of the world,"<sup>41</sup> the featuring of the face as the signifier of ego—all conspire to map the body as an individualized, privatized entity. This privatization is at paradoxical odds with the nature of video to yield any image to the public. And herein lies the beauty of Jonas's video, for through the activation of the video apparatus's built-in mechanisms to "de-synchronize" (as Douglas Crimp has put it),<sup>42</sup> to fragment vision and to destabilize the viewer (emphasized throughout by the constant movement of the vertical hold bar), Jonas defies television's popular capacity to unify viewers around a mythically definitive understanding of the body. Instead, she unifies viewers around an understanding of the body as representation itself, as constantly traversed by the technical tropes of media and potentially proliferating in meaning.

In a sense, processes of representation are also at work in Bakhtin's conception of the medieval body, but they aim at the grandiose unification that the modern body rejects. The medieval body is made to appear "degraded" in order to represent "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it [degradation] is a transfer . . . to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity." Thus conflated with nature, the body is immune to any characterization as a psychologized entity, in the sense of being defined by its representations, and is only allowed to serve as a vehicle of representation—for Bakhtin, as a representation of "the collective ancestral body of all the people."<sup>43</sup>

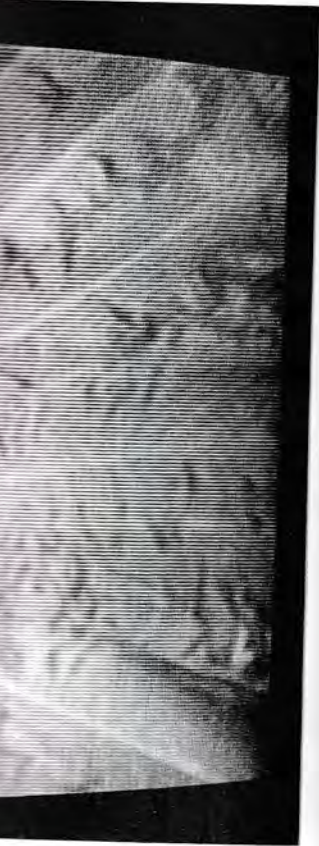
In part, Bakhtin's ideologizing of the body as unmitigatingly glued to nature is enhanced by carnival's use of the mask, which, predictably, bears different meanings in medieval and modern times. In the former, the grimacing, caricatured mask "rejects conformity to oneself"; in the rejection, the individualized self is linked to "folk culture's organic whole." In contrast, in modern times, the mask "hides something, keeps a secret, deceives."<sup>44</sup> This is the use epitomized by Jonas, who in parts of *Vertical Roll* and its predecessor *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972) wears a mask that because of its near-translu-



Joan Jonas, *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, 1972.

cence can often be mistaken for her real face, until the uncanniness of the likeness reveals the obvious differences—the mask's lack of cheekbone delineations, skin texture, and so forth. In the realization of this difference we are set at as great a distance from the "real" Jonas as the closeness we thought we had—a distance that is emphasized by the glare of studio light as it bounces off the mask's slick plastic surface. But it is this function of distancing that takes Jonas's use of the mask—purchased at a store selling erotica—beyond mere rejection of any carnivalesque enchantment with organicism. This distancing ironizes the implications of her pseudonym—"Organic Honey"—chosen at the time the video was produced. For what she hides, as she hides behind this mask, is the problematic tendency of the viewing subject to reduce gender to "organic," "natural" meaning.

In her now-famous article on masquerade, Mary Ann Doane argued that the "masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femi-



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ximity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic.”<sup>45</sup> By wearing the mask, Jonas sets femininity apart from the body and situates it appropriately in the arena of production. Her denial of closeness is everywhere in her work, particularly in the processes of production. *Vertical Roll*, for example, was originally produced in a performance context that confused the sixties traditions of bringing the physical body up close to the audience. Instead, the audience at Jonas's performance saw her from a considerable distance, performing before a video camera. The only “closeness” to the performer was that provided by the obvious representation of her on the monitor—a representation that she closely watched as she, herself, created it.

Jonas also uses mirrors in her work to deny closeness.<sup>46</sup> Early performances of *Vertical Roll* began with Jonas, standing nude before the audience, methodically scrutinizing her body with a small, round, hand mirror. As much as this action was overwhelmingly narcissistic (serving as an emblem of Jonas's closeness to herself) and exhibitionist (forcing closeness onto the audience, making them feel as if they were inside her own home), the hyperfragmenting of the image of the body reduced it to a series of ridiculous abstractions. In this simplistic illustration of the fundamental fragmentation of the mirror stage, Jonas presented a table of contents of her more complicated video work—its dealings with the body, its necessarily fragmented representation in processes of identification, and its reference to the domestic site in which those processes originate. It was through the apparatus of video, with its facility to promote all these contents, that Jonas was able to stage her “resistance to patriarchal positioning.” For it is through video that we are repeatedly returned to and forced to confront “trouble in the home.”

As I mentioned earlier, performance-without-video also has the power to connect us to the domestic site by way of the body and the psychodynamics of its reception. Performance of the 1960s sidestepped this connection, however, in the name of social protest. One site targeted for protest, according to art historian Maurice Berger, was the site of labor:

*A number of sixties performances (such as those of Robert Morris, Carolee Schneemann and Lucio Pozzi) were about pleasure and art as a mechanism of desublimation, as a response to being a worker in industrial society. Perhaps these were naive or utopian gestures but the artists thought they could possibly skirt oppression or show how, in the end, that possibility itself was a myth.*<sup>47</sup>

We might look at any of the task-oriented performances by Judson Dance Theater artists, like Trisha Brown or Yvonne Rainer, as examples here, but a more spectacular piece like Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964) would also qualify as a symbolic staging of protest. It is the site of artistic labor, in part, that was contested in *Meat Joy*—a piece that, not surprisingly, was carnivalesque in na-

ture. Male and female performers, clad in bikinis and underwear, interspersed acts of erotically writhing around each other on the floor with painting one another's body. The traditional act of painting is thus *degraded*, to use Bakhtin's term, removed from its lofty heights and transferred to the comic arena of the carnivalesque, where it is used to unify the performers and to symbolically extend this sense of unity to the audience, which was positioned close to the performance area. "Our proximity," recalls Schneemann, "heightened the sense of communality, transgressing the polarity between performer and audience."<sup>48</sup>

Art historian Kristine Stiles, in her work on DIAS (the Destruction in Art Symposium held in London in 1966), has theorized how this polarity is, at least in part, obliterated in performance. The body, she claimed, functions metonymically, like a bridge or conduit, to link audience and performer. In works like Herman Nitsch's *Orgies Mysteries Theatre* productions, one of which was conducted at DIAS, Stiles saw the artist as "mediat[ing] between the viewer and the meaning of the event. The alienation between subject and object was thereby reduced, although not resolved. In other words, the artist as being-in-the-world visualized the contingency and inter-dependence of subject identifying with subject."<sup>49</sup> In Nitsch's pieces all audience members are simultaneously performer-participants. They manipulate and interact with ritual elements such as milk, honey, and animal carcasses in what could be viewed as a carnivalesque attempt at renewing the human body through its symbolic association with the animal world.

Whether or not sixties work really succeeded in its Bakhtinian, carnivalesque attempts is a question that would require yet another essay. What interests me more for now, as I close this essay, is the *nature* of the attempts, recognized by Stiles as effecting a reduction, though not resolution, of alienation, and by Berger as showing, perhaps, that the possibility of skirting oppression through performance is itself a myth. These recognitions, I believe, were precisely those of the early seventies artists who questioned the value of utopianism by exploring the very psychodynamics of alienation and myth. From our brief look at sixties performance and these two art historians' assessments of it, we can see how the work of that era strongly pronounced a desire for anaclitic totalization and used the body as the chief material for the project. While the body can, indeed, be mobilized in protest, without also looking at the psychodynamics stirred up by that protest and the hierarchized institutions in which they originate, the problems sought to be solved through reduction of alienation, or desublimation, are only treated *orthopaedically*, to recall Lacan's term.

As video became available as a medium, artists in the early 1970s were literally equipped to stand before the mirror of representation and confront physical identity as psychological, fragmentary, and metaphoric, thus passing up their chance at the aforementioned treatment. If, as Stiles concluded, "[b]y



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presenting the living figure as form, subject matter, and content, destruction-  
in-art works condensed and displaced paradoxes of destruction and creation ex-  
perienced only indirectly as historical events,"<sup>50</sup> then the events of the Viet-  
nam War, so indirectly experienced by most of us as mediated history, cannot  
be discounted as one, among many, historico-logical motivations for artists of  
the early 1970s to seize on the medium of television as an expedient tool for  
investigating the "representation of the figure" and the psychologized structure  
of alienation and myth that had been witnessed nightly in the home.<sup>51</sup> The  
trouble that was piped into our homes had a direct relation to the trouble that  
was there already—the trouble with power, organized around patriarchal hier-  
archy, which had caused such a mistaken conflict in the first place. The time  
for physical protest over this specific conflict was passing by the time the work  
discussed in this essay was produced, and the time for analysis of the underly-  
ing structure of that which had been protested had begun.