How to end up with art: the aesthetic experience of the early video art

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HOW TO END UP WITH ART: THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF
THE EARLY VIDEO ART

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This article contemplates various notions of time and space relative to a series of performances at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, when contemporary artists like Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Christian Boltansky or Richard Serra began their artistic careers. We'll first sketch some basic coordinates of the performance art, emphasizing on the internal connection between body, action and perception. Finally, we'll raise the question about the aesthetic value of these video experiments and suggest that, although they seem to have not consistency, nor a narrative plan, they do pursue limited goals.

I. The urgency of finding new spaces for the aesthetic experience

One of the most remarkable shifts after Modernism was the transformation of the artwork from a monument to an event. From this perspective, the art tendencies that received in the 1970’s the name of “performance”, could be seen as the most radical manifestation of the crisis of the artistic object and the author.

This shift was signaled in 1958 by Allan Kaprow in the article “The legacy of Jackson Pollock”¹, an interesting example of how the same artist could be claimed, at the same time, as representative for a continuity perspective of art history and also for a discontinuity perspective: on the one hand, Pollock could be claimed, from Greenberg’s point of view, as the culmination of the advanced culture versus the mass culture and on the other hand, he could be seen as the prophet of a new generation of visual artists. In the perspective of Hans Hamuth’s photographs of 1951, Pollock reveals himself, for that new generation, as the maximum exponent but also as the destructor of the tradition of painting, as if his painted surfaces were not anymore paintings, but the own space of painting. Pollock’s legacy, according to Kaprow, means the starting point of this destructive tradition of the medium, towards the unlimited experiment of the space potential of art. From this moment on, the expanded field of art – the studio or the cotidianity in general – becomes art itself.

The artistic action had been traditionally used in art theory just in order to explain the significance of the final artistic product, i.e. the *oeuvre*. However, in the performance art, there is no artistic significance beyond the artistic action, since the time of the artwork is the same time of its own making. The work *is* the action, which means that the artistic significance is the interval between the performer and the audience. In fact, as Thomas Fuchs remarks, “implicit temporality and tacit performance of the body are nearly synonymous: lived time may be regarded as a function of the lived body.” During the late 1960’s, artists have intuitively responded to this new conceptual context by showing a special interest in aspects as the duration and repetition, proper to the creation process. Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Bill Viola, Christian Boltansky or Richard Serra, begun their careers as video artists, all of them focusing on transforming the studio or the gallery space into a kind of theatrical laboratory, in order to experiment their own routine and repeat their automatisms in front of the camera, as if they tried to capture the strange *continuum* of their cotidianity.

Here are a few examples:

Vito Acconci: his first videos are obsessively repeated actions like forcing to open the closed eyelids of a woman (*Pryings*, 1971), catching a ball with the covered eyes (*Blindfold catching*, 1970), etc.


Christian Boltanski: he recorded a man coughing up until bleeding (*L’Homme qui tousse*, 1969), which is in fact an extension into another medium of some of the themes he explored in his early painting, like *La Chambre Ovale* (1967).

Richard Serra: the 1968s *Hand Catching Lead* was his first video and features a single shot of a hand in an attempt to repeatedly catch chunks of material dropped from the top of the frame; Serra’s fascination with handling of materials can already be discerned in *Verb List* (1967-1968), a summary of elementary verbs like “to tear”, “to cut”, “to splash”, verbs that define a way of sculpting. *Splashing*, realized in Leo Castelli’s art gallery stockroom, is a good example of Serra’s process-oriented approach – the splashing was done with molten lead against the area where the back wall and the floor met (*Splashing, Hands Tields*, 1978-1979).

Bruce Nauman: he recorded his own daily routines, such as leaning back and bouncing forward from the corner (*Bouncing in the corner*, 1968), pinching his neck (*Pinch Neck*, 1969), playing the violin (*Playing a Note on the Violin while I walk around the Studio*, 1967-1968), pacing back and forth (*Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, 1967-1968), etc.

Some of these early videos were joined together in retrospectives exhibitions like “A Rose has no teeth: Bruce Nauman in the 1960s” at Berkley Art Museum in 2007.3

We first are tempted to take these automatic actions as an impossible attempt to isolate the movement from the body, as if an archival impulse motivates the performer.4 The self seems to be reconstructed here by means of a kind of post facto psychic autopsy. But if we go beyond this first impression, we detect an inherent ambiguity of the gesture in front of the camera: we do not know, in fact, if it’s about a controlled repetition of an isolated movements (in which case, the performer uses the camera as a tool for this differentiation) or if it is about an indiscernible totality of gesture and body (in which case, the video process transforms the performer in pure object and discarded any authorial intentionality). For example, in Bruce Nauman’s video Walking in an exaggerated manner around the Perimeter of a Square5 the body movement seems to attach to the camera: in front of the camera, the performer is not an artist anymore, but an object of the camera focus. At the same time, we don’t recognize any intentionality upon the camera as we do recognize in the case of the cinematographic camera. In the case of Nauman’s fixed camera, there is nobody behind ‘the camera, therefore these intimate gesture seem to be merely “self documentational”. From this perspective, sharing these actions with an audience, doesn’t transform it in a spectacle or in Art, but rather in a denunciation: we can not continue to make Art anymore.

Another interpretation of these actions could be made in terms of a regression to a primary condition of the subject, the performer exposes his body to an uncontrollable destructive force, while the viewer is appealed to assist to his minimum condition. The central ambiguity here is that such an action implies at the same time a closed process of “subjectivation” (because the automatic gesture seems to indicate an affirmative “here and now” condition), but also an open process of “objectivation” (in which the subject is resituated in a comprehension of the physical determinism, making way for a permanent relationship between body and its world).6 This work operates in “the zone

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3 A Rose Has No Teeth: Bruce Nauman in the 1960s, 2007, exposition curated by Canstancie Lewallen and organized by Berkley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive of the University of California.

4 In “The Archival Impulse”, October, 1 November 2004, vol. 110, Hal Foster defines the “archival impulse” as a desire to retrieve and materialize historical material, often in the production of new archives; as “connections between things that cannot be connected”, these impulse may follow the model of the artist as curator and play on the category of collection. Here, we use “archival impulse” in reference to a technology of the self, where the performer uses himself as a virtual space for experimentation, self-objectivation and testing of the limits of language.


6 “Subjectivation” and “objectivation” have here a functional use: we use “subjectivation” as the relationship between the subject and himself and “objectivation” as the relationship between the subject and the world. In a phenomenological terminology, we could say the object (in itself) and the subject (for itself) are found to co-exist in a kind of circularity when reflection is turn upon own’s body.
between the conceptual aspect of language and its physical presence as sign, questioning the ability of language to accurately define material reality”.

These two ways of interpretation – the regression to a primary scene (as an investigation of the self) and the archival impulse (as the power of language to define that self) – seem to parallel Bruce Nauman’s own explanation: his videos respond to “why anybody continues to make art” and how to “make sense of the process (…) when you can’t do any work, you can’t figure out how to get it started and once it’s started, you can’t figure out where it came from”. For Nauman’s generation of artists, making films became a kind of working on themselves – as artists – by means of becoming clear about their limits, then transfiguring them in such a way that those limits are both exceeded and preserved.

In short, we can argue that the early video art is basically about how to deal with a certain precarity of the post-modern condition of art or how to break free from the traditional concepts of what art was and experiment what art could be.

II. Art or idiocy?

We finally can raise the question about the aesthetic value of these early films and video tapes. On one hand, walking around the perimeter of a square, for example, doesn’t tell us any story; the other hand, watching such a repeated action for half and hour is quite boring. So, what kind of truth or beauty reveals an artistic practice that is purposefully nonsense and even boring? In other words, what happens if you take the artist’s traditional tool away? Is he still an artist?

Throughout the 1960’s and the 1970’s, the video art did not attract the attention it probably deserved and this corresponded to the outsider status of the video art practitioners. But after the turn of the 1980’s, as David Hall pointed out, the “histories” of the first decade began to emerge and a significant new wave of semiotic, psychoanalytic and gender theory was adopted with great enthusiasm. But contrary to suggestions in some accounts, there was no intention by most of these artists to aspire to a rational interpretation of their practices. In fact, the difficulty to locate a coherence of their work is due to the challenges they propose theoretically. Is easy to see the strong parodial and deconstructive potential of their actions and in fact, in retrospect, they can be

seen to owe more irrational rather than rational concerns. You just have to enter the
You Tube URL, searching by name “Bruce Nauman” and play the video “Walk”
to see the heterogeneity of reactions: “incredible work”, “Nauman rules”, “pure
genius!...”, “pretentious shit”, “retard”, etc. One can go even further and repeat
Nauman’s movement on his own way, like in a video of one of the users, called
“Following Bruce Nauman around my shed” and valued by the others as “very
bad instead of Bruce Nauman’s work” or, on the contrary, as “very accurate to
the original work”. A clear ironic intention had John Baldessari’s 1971 video
“I’m Making art”, where we see the artist repeatedly reciting the title as he
raises one arm after the other consecutively – a clear reference to the early video
practices of the sixties. What Baldessari attacked in this parody was precisely
the pretention of transcendence of such a textual practice.

Someone may argue that most of these early examples of video art can
parallel idiocy in this respect. In fact, “idiocy”, along with the notion of
“boredom”, is not such a bad concept to think the aesthetic experience in
general. The idea that art experience is somehow similar with the idiocy is not
a new one and we’ll indicate here just two possible contexts for it. First, it is
sending us to Freud’s *Interpretation of dreams*, where the dream, as a key to a
theoretical understanding of the subconscious, is not just the manifestation of a
repressed desire – by means of processes as the condensation and the
placement, but also a strategy of bearing the reality and, in last instance, a
response to it. We usually take the dream as a withdrawal from reality: when we
become tired of receiving and responding to stimulants from environment, we
try to fall asleep. But at the same time, the dream is a mechanism to maintain
the contact with the reality: after all, if such absolute withdrawal was possible to
achieve, the sleeper would risk not waking up again, since more and more
strong stimulants in the morning are exactly what wakes up the sleeper. These
stimulants disturb us also during sleep and our mentality is forced to respond to
them – by dreams. Thus, an absolute withdrawal, in which we would stop to
perceive the environment, is not possible. We have to face reality and processes
like the condensation or the displacement work in the symptom formation.
Other unconscious compensatory products, accordingly to Freud in *The
Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, are the lapsus or the failed linguistic acts.
Effectively, most of the mentioned performances and videos of the sixties could
be easily described as a kind of absurd gestual stuttering, similar to the idiot
behavior or to specific children’s games, which are based on the use of the
repetition. If we apply the Freudian dream-work theory – in terms of the
unconscious process involved in both making and viewing art – to the aesthetic

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experience of the mentioned video practices, it could be argued that art was never before so close to the unconscious limits.

Another way to relate art and idiocy is the concept of the “Real”, like in Clément Rosset’s book *Le reel: Traité de l’idiotie*. Following the Greek word *idiotés* – *which originally means* “what is simple, individual, unique”, “one’s own”, Rosset argues that the Real is “idiot”, basically because it is impossible to be represented. Rosset follows here the Lacanian concept for the Real as "always in its place: it carries it glued to its heel, ignorant of what might exile it from there". According to Rosset, there are just few privileged situations when we can “catch” the Real and one of them is art: in fact, the idiot is not so far from the art genius, since the two look for “the Real”, beyond the language and the reflexive mediations.

In “A Critical History of 20th Century Art”, Donald Kuspit attacks Allan Kaprow – and by extension, his generation – because of his idea of an art as a “mystical vision of everyday life”. Kaprow’s artistic practice, shifted in what he called "activities", was devoted to the examination of everyday habits in a way nearly indistinguishable from ordinary life. According to Kuspit, Kaprow's *happenings* (in contrast to Beuys’) has no healing intention, “it does not offer to the individual the possibility of self-transformation, and with that, implicitly, the transcendence of inorganic everyday society and mechanically collective consciousness”, but rather affirms that “the individual is rooted in inescapable everydayness”. Kaprow’s artistic actions participate, with a naive responsiveness, says Kuspit, in the everyday world, in effect losing himself in it – which is one way of reconciling oneself to it – rather than struggling to transcend it through self-transformation. For Kuspit, the problem with these actions is that the self loses its independence, individuality, critical consciousness and creative power of transformation, until it can be named no longer “a transformative activity”, which is for Kuspit the authentic aesthetic experience. In *The End of Art*, Kuspit defines the aesthetic experience as an “altered state of consciousness” a “non-normal and unconventional consciousness of reality”, in contrast to everyday experience – with its convention-respecting, and thus supposedly normal, “realistic” consciousness. We can agree with Kuspit that the aesthetic experience produce itself as a specific consciousness – a non “realistic” one, but his suggestion that this experience is preserved only for a privileged few seem to be a Romantic interpretation – problematical today, within a society where everybody has free access to art.

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Ironically, Kuspit’s critique makes us return to Nauman’s own comment that most of his work “is about why anybody continues to make art” (in that transformative and social sense of the word “Art” claimed by Kuspit). Effectively, these films pay no attention to a narrative plan but while they have no overall telos, they do pursue limited goals. We can argue that this kind of art work don’t answer questions, but rather see them revealed. The physical exertions of these performances stimulate the imaginative resources we possess to respond, in a non-heroic way, to the constricting circumstance of the contemporary everyday life. And one of these circumstances is the caducity of certain concept of Art. Such artistic practices shows us that the aesthetic experience supersedes the art work in importance, while the artistic process and the perception itself – the encounter or the tension between artist and viewer, between language and experience, among other themes, is now the subject matter of art. In the end, if these early video experiments – name them absurd or boring, really had a transforming force, there was not in the object or in the process, not even in the medium, but in a new way of questioning Art – in itself never boring.