# Performative Impulses

Andrew James Paterson

Performance (and performers) were crucial catalysts at the inception of both film and video technologies. What made the pictures moving was, after all, movement itself. Thus, many early movies depicted trains and boats and cars and horses and people. And video art developed as a performative and/or testimonial usurpation of that "contaminated media-tool," the camcorder.[1] Formative video artists inverted the camcorder's intended military surveillance function in order to perform and document their personal body politics.

However, the rapid development of production and postproduction possibilities for media arts problematized the roles of relatively non-mediated performance within the production technologies. Simply recording or documenting performance was failing to seriously explore the medium's formal, aesthetic, and political potentials. Theories of montage, polemicized by Russian artists such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov and themselves influenced by the American narrator D.W. Griffith, shifted the process of filming well

beyond staged adaptations of what were originally vaudevillian routines. Video art, by turn, has often been characterized (or marred) by tendencies toward using the medium's technical possibilities or idiosyncrasies for their own formal logistics. Bodies were often secondary to the filming or recording apparatus and editing technologies or else completely non-existent. Also, experimental film and video has frequently been suspicious of drama—considering actors and synchronized sound to be vestiges of mainstream commercial cinema and television. Montage, at its most intense, occupies framed spaces by collapsing time rather than either dramatizing or replicating it. In contrast, many performance pieces and realizations intentionally deploy "real" time, which tends to either invigorate or repel its many audiences.



Indeed, the position of the audience in relation to the performer or "the entertainment" is problematized in a good deal of performance-oriented film and video. "What I wanted...was a way that my presence could affect a space into and out of which people passed."[2] Vito Acconci is here referring to his performance and body-art work. The addition of the camcorder apparatus invokes both television coverage and the peep show—television is meant to be viewed in the private space of the home while dirty pictures require their own booths and arcades in addition to the lucrative home porn markets. Video camcorders and super 8 cameras have also been the primary recorders of "the home movie" and often the spectator is watching a documented ritual that seems to be a very private matter indeed. The ritual speaks private languages, or refers to "public languages" only to violently break away from them. Many viewers (and self-appointed custodians or representatives of the viewing public) like to make sharp demarcations between what is worth displaying for the public and what should remain a home movie, for friends and families only.

Acconci's *Theme Song* is a prototypical example of performative self-portraiture that negotiates a precarious balance between private ritual and public expectations of gratification—the videotape simultaneously reaches out to and threatens its audiences. Acconci as performer begs that the viewer permit him to wrap his arms around her (or him). However, his tone borders on being imperative. This performer wants not only to seduce but also corral the audience; he simultaneously refuses to reach out beyond himself to the assumed audience. He flirts with public language only to retreat into his intensely private realm; he demands intercourse only to reaffirm masturbation. There is more than a slight element of sado-masochistic play in Acconci's video-performance piece. And the performer/audience relationship is and is not consensual. The bottom (audience) has entered the performer's, or top's, space and doesn't have access to any safety

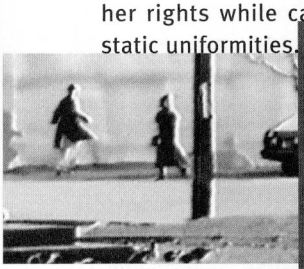
commands or code-words. In a live performance situation, audiences have a power to affect performances that the mediation of a screen or video monitor (in a public screening situation) eliminates.

Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy's *Fresh Acconci* references and then transports *Theme Song* into an opulent heterosexual Californian setting—extending the voyeur's duplicity. In contrast to *Theme Song*, *Fresh Acconci* reeks of money, transporting the indulgence from artists' bohemia to Hollywood (or straight porn) fantasia. Acconci's alternating pleas and commands are shifted from a direct performer/audience relationship to a not unconventional straight porn narrative. Acconci's original aggressively predatory advances have here become the language of an industry in which individualism has long been typecast and where impulses are nothing more than mechanisms of "the plot."



Performance in independent film and video as well as in much of performance art tends to be relatively non-matrixed. Character embellishments, accents, obvious costumes tend to be either entirely absent or else downplayed in direct address rather than dramatic mise-en-scène performance works. Audiences are intended to feel an uncomfortable sense that the individual on monitor is not "acting,"[3] but rather speaking one-on-one.

Cathy Sisler's *Aberrant Motion #4* inserts the performer into its impersonally urban environment—the performer literally attempts to occupy impersonal public spaces in a manner contrasting to Acconci's aggressive interventions. The performer spins—she's literally a spinner rather than a walker or driver or consumer. Sisler has indeed named her own "characters" throughout her body of live performance and performance-based tapes;[4] yet she is not acting in the sense of pretending to be someone other than herself. The Spinning Woman and the Almost Falling Woman are not theatrical personae. They are individuals who do not mesh with the crowds that the artist or performer contrasts herself with. Sisler is simultaneously asserting her right to exist within public spaces—the city of Montreal and the video frame—while positioning her body in mise-en-scènes which make it visually apparent that she cannot blend in and become anonymous. She believes in her rights while carrying an awareness of the absurdity of moving and static uniformities.



ABERRANT MOTION #4, CATHY SISLER

*Denial,* by Anne Whitehurst and Mike Stubbs, reverses the performer/audience positioning of monologue or direct performance. The camera and an interrogator's voice-over demands stock answers to formula questions addressed to a silent disabled person. The interrogator attempts to obtain truths and, in the unsuccessful process, cross-examines the patient about statements and actions that may or may not be rhetorical or performative rather than meant to be taken literally. The viewer is more than implicated as the disabled body is in fact out of control and very angry. *Locomotion,* by Anne Charlotte Robertson, re-enacts the performer's confinement to a padded cell in a psychiatric institution. Robertson's action may be a re-staging but its intensity transfers past tense into the present. Boundaries of entertainment, therapy, and performance practice are demolished. Robertson's action allows little, if any, space for viewers to reassure themselves that what they are watching is either fiction or "art."



Monique Moumblow's *Liabilities (The First Ten Minutes)* plays with the theatrical performative tradition of an artist's persona; but the lines between self-portrait and self-fantasy are disturbingly blurred. Monique, who may or may not be the artist herself, and her alter ego, Anne Russell, live out a symbiosis that is strange because it can't easily be dismissed as obvious role-playing. Both Monique and Anne are far too old to still be talking to themselves and/or playing with imaginary playmates.

Performative video and film has always encouraged personae, which often contrast with the non-matrixed performing styles of self-documented performance that intentionally trades on its own ambiguity about performance. Personae permit the performer to insist that the self-image is not his or her "self"; yet the extravagance of the persona itself draws attention to its own posturing. The boundaries between Brechtian alienation techniques and camp excess have always been fuzzy, and why not?

In *Rendez-vous,* Colin Campbell references his innovative performance-rooted video works of the '70s and '80s[5] by inventing a new persona related to earlier examples. Colleena is clearly the artist's or performer's feminine half or sister or whatever, but the persona is also a device to simultaneously self-reference his own body and practice as well as to comment on contemporary artistic and cultural landscapes. Campbell's personae and performance have always idiosyncratically blended conventions of theatrical camp and self-portraiture—Colleena, as well as her video ancestors, both is and is not Colin Campbell.

New York's Alex Bag could easily be one of Campbell's students. Her slacker eternal art student character has a similar off-handedness—Bag knows damn

well that throwaway lines often ring true. By portraying a student who might well never graduate, Bag affectionately yet humorously skewers the big terrifying art world that girls like her have to make their marks in. Her material is less literary than Campbell's—it may or may not seem scripted. But what seems unnervingly casual about Bag's presentation is deceptive—the girl is a highly skilled performer and an acerbically clever writer and cultural observer.



George Kuchar's video diaries have ingenuously yet artlessly walked that fine line between documentation or documentary and performance involving personae. Kuchar is the voyeur who is delightfully unable to hide behind the camera, which is thus truly the candid model. Watching Kuchar's portraits and excursions, one is introduced to subjects who immediately switch on along with the camera and those who don't make any switch. People interface with Kuchar's animate and inanimate obsessions—thunderstorms and tornadoes, pussy-cats, wieners, and turds. Spectacle is simultaneously glamorized and trivialized. Kuchar's stars are delightfully ordinary and intriguingly perverse.

Some performative cinema doesn't even pretend to reference notions of documentation or "the self." Jack Smith's notorious *Flaming Creatures* is a prototype for a queer underground cinema that aggressively defies formalist aversions to theatricality and blows camp homosexual fixations on high melodrama galaxies beyond their Hollywood limits. Smith mixes appropriated "mainstream" stocks (viva Maria Montez!) with dramatic mise-en-scènes that are simultaneously acting (with their extreme disdain for naturalism) and not acting (because of their utter disdain for verité or believability). Smith was an influence on, as well as a contemporary of, Warhol's cinematic world—where the truism that everybody could be a star was frequently inverted to the truism that a star could in fact be just anybody. Bruce LaBruce, in *Super 8 1/2* and *Hustler White,* homages both Smith and Warhol while cannibalizing barely contained Hollywood hysterics and gay male pornography. Early '70s California was a home for therapy masquerading as fiction and camp appropriations such as LaBruce's humorously yet mercilessly lay waste to posturings of sincerity and "self." Peggy Ahwesh and Margie Stroesser's *Strange Weather* and Leslie Singer's *Taking Back the Dolls* also live up to their titles—*The Valley of the Dolls* is flamboyantly reclaimed and then injected. The chemical cocktails that queers and other camp-enthusiasts knew were on the sets, but still not within the frames of Hollywood psycho-dramas and melodramas, are now deliriously highlighted and fetishized.

Television also has been notorious for the chaos obviously present immediately behind or underneath its slickly formulaic product. Anne McGuire in *I'm Crazy and You're Not Wrong* captures those magical moments idiosyncratic

to early '60s live television when the Garland-like entertainer "slips" in a public space and cannot easily have her "mistakes" edited out of the product. If television is implied by Vito Acconci's and Bruce Naumann's self-documentations, then live television represented an awkward meeting point of theatre verging on therapy—the home viewer can enjoy the forbidden in the comfort of his or her own home.



Joe Gibbons' *Multiple Barbie* and McGuire's *When I Was a Monster* serve notice to those all too willing to routinely play doctor. Assuming that Barbie has a single personality let alone multiples is itself a performative conceit and Gibbons portrays a psychiatrist far more cruel than the concerned do-gooder in *Denial.* This shrink is so smug and arrogant that it is truly cathartic when Barbie rebels—when the inanimate puts the pseudo-animate in his rightful place. Tops who do not realize that they are bottoms are always good for a sadistic chuckle. McGuire dares her visitors and viewers to deny her space in *When I Was A Monster.* Using a wonderfully delayed recording of the B-52s' song *Dance This Mess Around,* the bedridden performer holds her paralyzed left arm out on display and then mimes the act of delirious driving. Gibbons sets himself up for his patient's eventual rebellion while McGuire rebels against her doctors and the doctor-figures in her audience as she defiantly delights in her close-up. Gibbons' doctor becomes a victim while McGuire's patient refuses to act like one. The performer dares the viewer to hold her gloriously injured hand.

*WHEN I WAS A MONSTER,* ANNE McGUIRE

Steve Hawley and Tony Steyger's *Language Lessons* mock-documents the scholars and enthusiasts for avant-languages such as Volapuk, Esperanto, and Sol Re Sol (a musically based language). These invented languages reference concrete or sound poetry and the beauty of sonics unintended for literal and representational communication but rather intended to be heard and then joyfully responded to. The relationship between verbal language and image within experimental film and video art has usually contrasted with its rather literal pre-eminence within narrative or dramatic traditions. Cause and effect so often having been thrown to the wind, it follows that sentences and even words should not need to be sequential.



Functional language has been relegated to the realm of elemental shopping and mindless appraisal. Jinhan Ko's *Excerpt 7 (from Jin's Banana House)* presents the performer against an almost non-existent backdrop reciting a litany of responses such as "so good, so great, so excellent." The artist sends up the tendency of audiences to respond strictly in qualitative vocabularies while philosophizing on the inevitable parallels between appreciation of the irrational and the banality of advertising's adjectives.

John Mariott and Ed Sinclair's *Art That Says Hello* and Karma Clarke-Davis's *Master F—There Are People Who* transfer Acconci's explorations of how a performer's presence might affect space through which people pass—from the relatively inaccessible galleries to the public realms of 7-11 grocery stores and street vending. Clarke-Davis marks herself as an already marked woman—is she a lady of the evening? Exactly what kind of consumer is she? The grocer's and the customers' attempts to assign labels strike out miserably. Clarke-Davis's walking woman, unlike Sisler's, knows that she's a star because she is ultimately unnamable. Marriott's Courtesy Service Man is so unpretentiously genial, so eager to provide courtesy services that are routinely bypassed by big and small businesses alike, that there must be something ulterior about him. The yellow of his character's shirts and caps is not unlike the generic yellow of '80s supermarket generic merchandise.

Surrealists and Dadaists were among the first to realize the montage and mise-en-scène possibilities of the cinematic frame; performative work tends to either critique or snub predictable psychologies and sociologies endemic to mainstream dramas of film and television. Those industries are dependent upon seamlessness—image and sound must be easily explicable and superficially harmonious. In much of the video and film work by artists such as Nelson Henricks, Nikki Forrest, Monique Moumblow, Steve Reinke, Jinhan Ko, Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby, pictures and sounds are encouraged to be observed in often apparent isolation from one another. In tapes such as Henricks' *Emission,* Forrest's *Static,* Vey Duke and Battersby's

video booklet of singing voice-overs, computer drawings, and monologues *Rapt and Happy,* seeing and listening again become performances or performative acts.

The word "performance" can also be used to refer to visual and audio phenomena. How do framed spaces become occupied and/or abandoned? In a large percentage of avowedly experimental cinema the camera is an extension of the filmmaker's body and the recorded images are performed upon at least as much as they themselves are performers. The act of filming or taping and transcending the temporal and technical limitations of relatively low-end mediums is itself performative—whether turning the camera upon one's actual body or using the camera as a bodily extension. Anne-Charlotte Robertson's *Apologies* practically inverts the codes of stand-up comedy and the rehabilitated celebrity circuit—the performer and subject and object and filmmaker is in front of her audience for as long as she wants to be, even though her film stock keeps running out and her lights keep shutting off. Robertson skillfully manipulates audiences' expectations and limitations as shrewdly as Acconci does.



Pleasure Dome as an organization has consistently throughout its ten years been characterized by a variety of nomadism. It certainly has not shunned institutions but has generally dealt with them quite successfully on its own terms. This blend of anarchic impulses with strategic occupation of institutions and structures has been reflected in an overwhelming majority of the performative films and videos presented by Pleasure Dome. The most successful individual works and programmes have demanded that viewers take their own initiatives and come to the artists and their aesthetics, unless the individual work or programme is about consent and surrender. Passive viewing has seldom been encouraged throughout Pleasure Dome's history. Active viewing (seeing as itself performance) has been demanded and active viewing has more often than not been rewarded. Performance, referring to modes and manners of how frames can be occupied and utilized by bodies, images, and sounds, has been a touchstone of Pleasure Dome's history and existence. ★