

Matthew Hynds

Reflections in Video:

My Own Practice and its Relationship to the Art Movement

4866 words

Reflections of the self

In 2011 I made a video installation titled 'Look At Me'. It was a large mixed media assembly designed to present visitors with the surprise of encountering their own likenesses on a stack of television monitors.

To preserve the surprise it was necessary to conduct the visitors one way through the installation, without giving them the impression they were being directed. This was made possible by closing one set of doors and building a corridor which lead directly into the installation itself. At this stage the visitor was presented with a lengthy piece of text that glowed mysteriously behind a one-way mirror. As they lingered to read this, four hidden cameras recorded them in section, and wired the resulting footage to a stack of computers. These processed the video streams and introduced a staggered delay, rendering the visitor feet first - followed by the legs, torso and head. This delay served two purposes. Firstly, to maximize the chance that the visitor would come face to face with him or herself, when they turned the final corner. And secondly, to open up the possibility that different people's bodies would be fleetingly combined, during a steady flow of human traffic.

This latter idea is a riff on the popular drawing game - 'exquisite corpse' - whereby two or more people can take it in turns to draw a section of a person, without looking at the previous person's effort. When the entire image is unfolded, there is a sense of revelation as the individual approaches are given new meaning as a ludicrous - often grotesque - rendering of a figure. The game has been taken up by the Chapman brothers, whose work was recently exhibited at Tate Modern (Exquisite Corpse, n.d.). Having visited this exhibition, I realized that video might provide a suitable medium for updating the game, which has proved especially popular

with the Surrealists. The free-form, reactive qualities of the game clearly appealed to them, and my goal was to keep the fundamental character of the exercise intact following the transition from drawing to video.

The versatility of video was soon exploited by artists, as the technology became available. Some of the earliest exponents of the practice made rapid progress developing its potential, creating a startlingly direct medium which confronted the viewer in an entirely new way. An example is Dan Graham's 'Present Continuous Past(s)' (see fig.1). Here, a single camera is placed above a monitor in a square room. Two of the walls are comprised of mirrors, and the camera and the monitor both face one of these walls. The camera itself is linked to the monitor using an eight second delay, which is described by Gregor Stemrich (in his analysis of Graham's work) as "the outer limit of the neurophysiological short-term memory" (2001: 68). He goes on to write:

'If you see your behaviour eight seconds ago presented on a video monitor «from outside» you will probably.. not recognize the distance in time but tend to identify your current perception and current behaviour with the state eight seconds earlier. Since this leads to inconsistent impressions which you then respond to, you get caught up in a feedback loop. You feel trapped in a state of observation, in which your self-observation is subject to some outside visible control. In this manner, you as the viewer experience yourself as part of a social group of observed observers.' (Ibid)

This observation about the length of the delay is an important one, as it helps to determine how engaging the installation is likely to be with the public. If the delay is too short, the temporal disparity between physical reality and the video image will not be obvious

enough. If it is too long, there will emerge a fundamental disconnect between the observer and the observed self. Graham clearly felt that eight seconds was about right, as he designed half a dozen more variations on his 1974 installation, and all of his cameras and screens are delayed by that same interval (Time Delay Room, n.d.).

My own installation shares important characteristics with Dan Graham's concept. In particular, the use of 'viewer as participant' abandons the need for pre-recorded material, instead creating a minimal environment which becomes animated only when it is visited (or inhabited) by a human being. The use of materials is clearly very similar, with a reliance on mirrors, wood panels, video cameras and television sets. There is an experimental quality to these objects as well. At the heart of each is a mechanism which depends upon the unique qualities of video: Graham makes use of the 'feedback loop', whereby the camera and mirror conspire to create an infinitely regressive space, with the subject as temporal signifier. In this case, the introduction of a delay is designed to heighten the feeling of disembodiment. In my installation, it is designed to bring the visitors face to face with themselves. The visual joke of combining body sections is a nod towards 'exquisite corpse'; it is also a demonstration of the creative potential of the technology. There is a sense in which the mixture of cameras, mirrors and screens could be almost endlessly recombined in the pursuit of new surprises and sensations, and that the arrangement of the finished piece is governed more by the availability of resources than by the final realisation of an artistic concept. Graham's multiple installation plans attest to the plurality of possible designs.

For all the apparent similarities, there is a fundamental difference between Graham's installation and my own. In Graham's work, there is no attempt at deception. The viewer is made aware of his or her own participation. This characteristic applies to all of

his major installed works, which dominated his output during the 1970s. Through his use of cameras, monitors and mirrors, he is conducting psychological and social experiments. Some of these - such as 'Present Continuous Past(s)' - can be explored alone, while others function as group experiences. 'Public Space/Two Audiences' (1976), for example, comprises two rooms separated by sound-insulating glass, with a large mirror at one end (see fig. 2). Visitors are required to occupy each room for ten minutes, during which time they can observe the behaviour of the other group. There is a discrepancy here between the two group's physical proximity and their sensory isolation, and it is clear that Graham takes an anthropological interest in how the situation evolves. In this example as with others, there is a sense of transparency and expanse, where the glass works as an invisible barrier and the mirror creates the illusion of more space. In my work, the mirror serves to reflect the personal notion of the self, and to hide the video cameras. Ultimately, the 'viewer as participant' is forced to undergo a second transformation and become voyeur as they scrutinise the next unwitting subject. And herein lies the grounds for deception: to broadcast the fleeting affections a person may adopt when confronted with a mirrored surface (checking lipstick, hair etc), and in so doing, to remove it from the paradigm of personal reverie and give it new meaning as a public gesture. My intention was to create a minor short-circuit of the brain when the visitor turned the final corner and found his or her video self living on as a kind of curiosity for the other visitors.

Because - most of the time - this is the reality of the 'surveillance society': people do not know when they are being watched. The video images of everyone's banal day-to-day existences are entrusted to the stupefied gaze of faceless security guards sitting in windowless rooms in shops and office blocks. Or - more

likely - they are taped and taped over by an endless procession of human activity, never to be seen by anyone.

Bruce Nauman recognised this reality early on. In the late sixties he began building a series of corridor-based installations, which featured monitors attached to live video feeds. Through these arrangements, he 'set out to embed and implicate the viewers in the experience of the artwork, while constructing a disorientating unease and complicity between them and the space they inhabited' (Salter, 2010: 124). The 'unease' was generated by the confined, oppressive spaces between the large panels, and the realisation that the visitor was also the exhibit. In 1970 he installed 'Live/Taped Corridor' in the Whitney Museum in New York, which has been described as having a profound effect on those who entered it. At the end of a narrow corridor some eleven metres long, he placed two television monitors, one stacked above the other. It was only as the viewer got close to these screens that they realised they were looking at images of themselves, being relayed live from cameras in the ceiling. The cameras were positioned above the entrance, so the closer the viewers got to the screens, the smaller their images appeared. Margaret Morse described her experience some years later: 'To me it was as if my body had come unglued from my own image, as if the ground of my orientation in space were pulled out from under me' (1990: 153). A similar sensation of metaphysical dislocation is explored in the 1999 film 'Being John Malkovich'. Here, the psychic journey into Malkovich's head is given physical form in the shape of a long dark tunnel - with everything he sees and experiences taking place through a little window at the end. It is like a surveillance camera which doubles as a person's head - with the implication being that this is a logical endpoint for our image-obsessed, media-driven age.

Certainly, Nauman's early experiments in video art have a sinister quality, which inspired a strange mixture of curiosity and

dread. It was a far-from-optimistic herald to the dawn of a new technological age. Similarly disquieting were the works of Peter Campus from the same period. Another pioneer of the use of video in art, he would use panes of glass in a similar way to Dan Graham - exploiting the dual qualities of reflectivity and transparency. In pieces such as 'Interface' (1972), he would present the visitor with a piece of angled glass, behind which was placed a video camera. The camera relayed the image of the visitor to a projector which also faced the glass, creating a double image of the reflected and the projected self. Through this very simple arrangement, Campus was inviting an aesthetic comparison between the 'true' reflection and the video image, and in so doing, was drawing attention to the imperfections of the technology, and the unique qualities of the video image. By angling the glass a certain way he would distort the image of the figure, creating something visually unstable. In her critique of his work, Frederique Baumgartner writes:

'In all of the eighteen installations [Campus] created between 1971 and 1978, he systematically played on the disturbance of the viewer's image. Through various technical processes, the artist confronted viewers with images of themselves which were alternately fragmented, split, inverted or otherwise deformed, thus giving perceptible form to the complexity of identity-building.' (Interface, n.d.)

Through his disruptions of the human form, Campus is making explicit the distinction between the self and its representation; its avatar. He is drawing a line at the point of divergence between physical reality and its imitation. By exaggerating and distorting the familiar contours of the visitor's own face and body, he is building more than just a house of mirrors. He is opening the door to a cathedral of possibilities, where identity means nothing because it

can be stretched, bent and recalculated to the designer's will. The reality he describes is disquieting because it presents a foretaste of an unfathomable future, where any notion of the 'original' is blasted into a kaleidoscope of light.

Another of his key works - which deals directly with the problem of the original in the digital age - is titled 'Three Transitions' (1973). In this piece, Campus uses early video editing techniques to erase his own face, apparently rubbing away the skin with his fingers, to reveal another version of his face behind it (Three Transitions - Peter Campus, 2008). The unhurried manner with which he daubs himself recalls a performer applying makeup before a show - and yet in this case it is the act of removal that Campus is simulating; the obliteration of self-image. The disquieting aspect of the work arrives with the realisation that not one of these entities can be looked upon as the original. We are presented with a succession of masks, given rudimentary life by the processes of the technology. Campus is revealing our innate desire to locate the 'original' - the progenitor of all reflection within the house of mirrors. He is making the point that no such nucleus exists. In this new paradigm, personal identity is transient, decentralized. It is adjustable, erasable and copyable. The self-image is just a veneer. Through his early experiment in video, Campus is telling us *there is nothing behind it*.

In relation to his installed works, Michael Rush writes: 'In what may seem an ironic twist from our present position, Campus was trying to shake viewers out of their passive role as spectators', and he cites the popularity of reality TV (Video Art, 2003: 33). This was probably the high point for the format in the UK, when Big Brother was getting large audience figures. Since then interest has waned, with the Internet largely taking its place as a social media platform. Now, the avatar takes on new resonance as a kind of

representative in the digital realm. The spectator has become the performer, and so the audience is no longer passive. Whether this development represents progress depends on how it impacts the notion of 'self' - is this really an expansion of being, or is it evidence of fracturing, splitting, of deformation?

On the subject of consciousness, and the human relationship with technology, John Gray writes:

'Once the frail and wasting body is cast off, the Extropians believe, the mind can live forever. These cybernauts seek to make the thin trickle of consciousness - our shallowest fleeting sensation - everlasting. But we are not embrained phantoms encased in mortal flesh. Being embodied is our nature as earth-born creatures.

Our flesh is easily worn out; but in being so clearly subject to time and accident it reminds us of what we truly are. Our essence lies in what is most accidental about us - the time and place of our birth, our habits of speech and movement, the flaws and quirks of our bodies.

Cybernauts who seek immortality in the ether are ready to disown their bodies for the sake of a deathless existence in the ether. Perhaps someday they will achieve what they crave, but it will be at the price of losing their animal souls.'

(Straw Dogs, 2002: 144)

Much like Peter Campus's 'Three Transitions', we are given a glimpse into an existence which is transmutable, unrooted in physical reality. Gray looks upon the physical self as more than just a vessel for the mind; it is fundamental to who we are. Without a physical presence, and the interpersonal relationships that makes possible, we are cast adrift, consigned to that 'deathless existence.' Unbound by physical laws, these existential beings of the future might change

their faces instead of their socks, or get rid of them altogether. But what remains would not be human. The human body is important, then, partly because it conditions the mind. Also, unarguably, *it is the original.*

The Magic of the Moving Image

In discussion at the Hirshorn Gallery in Washington DC, Douglas Gordon said of his work:

'I wanted to deconstruct a little bit of the magic of cinema, show people that the screen is so thin. But at the same time when you walk round the other side of the screen, it's just as magical to see that the image is visible on the other side - but it's reversed. 'Why does my shadow appear on one side but not the other?' These are questions that are very easily answered. Yet, in my experience, there is not a big difference between the way a child behaves in front of this work and an adult. People are waving in front of it on one side and absolutely amazed that they cast no shadow on the other side.'

(Meet The Artist: Douglas Gordon, 2008)

As a video artist, Gordon has been exploring this dynamic between pre-recorded material and the viewer since the early nineties. His installed works are often characterized by freestanding screens, which allow visitors to circulate within the space in the manner he describes. Many of his key works make use of material from well-known films, which have made an impact on the public consciousness. Of particular interest to me is 'Through a Looking Glass' (1999), where the 'mirror scene' from Taxi Driver is played out on dual floor-to-ceiling projector screens. The screens face each other, and one of the sequences is reversed, so that it mirrors the one opposite. However, the videos gradually go out of sync with each other, fracturing the relationship between the character and his reflected self (Fig. 3). Describing his motivation behind this piece, Gordon continues:

'Something magic must happen between the surface of the glass and the silver. And wouldn't it be great if you could expand that thickness - I don't want to be on that side of the mirror or that side - I want to be half way. To have one foot inside the fantasy and one in the reality. What I wanted to do here was take the mirror which must be a quarter of an inch thick, and make it, say, 35 feet wide, so you're trapped between the glass and the mirrored surface.' (Ibid)

By sandwiching the viewer between the two video screens, Gordon is implicating him or her in the disintegrating psychology of the lead character. The fracturing of identity is clearly present here, although in this case it does not require the use of cameras and mirrors to present the viewer-as-subject-matter. Rather, the viewer is invited to wander ghost-like through the headspace of the protagonist, and to experience the rupture in contiguity between both videos, without any acknowledgement of his or her own physical presence. Gordon has used the mirror as a way of expanding non-space into a physical domain, which nevertheless shrinks the viewer into a kind of insignificance, as though he or she is not really there. In his contemporary review of 'Through A Looking Glass', Ken Johnson analyses the structural complexities:

'De Niro is pretending to be Bickle, who is pretending that his own image in the mirror is yet a third person; he is also talking through the mirror to us and through us to his own image across the room. It's dizzying to sort out, but says something about how shifty mediated reality can be.'

(Art In Review; Douglas Gordon: 'Through a Looking Glass', 1999)

Like Peter Campus's self portrait in 'Three Transitions', De Niro is wearing a succession of masks. Instead of digital renderings, these

are psychological projections which Douglas Gordon has granted physical space within the gallery. Both techniques have the effect of pushing back reality, and destabilizing notions of the self.

Gordon tends to adopt a minimal approach in the presentation of his videos. For his major installed works - such as '24 Hour Psycho', 'Play Dead; Real Time' and 'Through A Looking Glass' - he simply presents the viewer with one or more projection screens in an otherwise empty gallery space. The arrangement of these screens varies. In 'Play Dead; Real Time', for example, two large projection screens are placed at an angle to each other some distance apart, along with a small television monitor. They display footage shot on mobile video cameras of a four-year-old Indian elephant, wandering around the Gagosian gallery in New York (Fig. 4). The seemingly unplanned distribution of the screens is appropriate to the subject matter, and encourages the viewer to move freely between them. The fluid motion of the cameras - which move on trolleys low to the ground - also encourages the viewer to explore the installation, and to appreciate the formal qualities of the video images, as they relate to one another within the space. Conceptually, this loose arrangement is antithetical to the structures designed by Bruce Nauman, Peter Campus and Dan Graham in the 1970s, and demonstrates a willingness on Gordon's part to achieve maximum visual impact through the use of video alone. Of course, scale helps to achieve this. By presenting wide-format screens that tower above the gallery visitors, he is able to reproduce the elephant in something like actual size. By framing the animal in the top half of the screen, he is ensuring that people will be looking up - even when the elephant is lying down. Coupled with the camera movements, this heightens the respectful, reverential feelings that most people have towards elephants. The small monitor is placed on the floor, forcing visitors to look down. It displays close-up details of the elephant, such as

its eyes. Here, the visitor is encouraged to scrutinize - maybe even to appreciate the fragility of an animal which could nevertheless squash a car. In discussing this particular work, Gordon says:

'One of the beautiful things with film and video is it can imbue a [...] sensibility that doesn't physically exist' (Douglas Gordon On Working With Elephants, 2010). With the arrangement of the screens, and the use of scale, Gordon is exploiting this characteristic. He is amplifying the natural aura of his subject. By presenting the footage in such a simple way, without embellishment, he is demonstrating the seductive power of cinema.

It is worth remembering that no conception of 'magic' can exist without the acknowledgement of an act of subterfuge. In this case, the duplicity arises from presenting the image of the elephant in a manner that places little emphasis on the means of its reproduction; i.e. the projector. All the gallery visitors are encouraged to see is the image, and the image alone. In simple terms, this could be described as the 'magic of cinema', whereby the complicated mechanicals are hidden from view, and all that remains is the unadorned image. It is a setting familiar to any moviegoer: the large screen, the forward-facing seats, and the projection booth, where the projectionist toils away unseen, operating the equipment. The objective here is to suspend disbelief on the part of the viewer, to encourage him or her to forget about the enormous labours that go into making a modern feature film, and about the precarious technical processes that make possible its reproduction. All of the design details of a cinema combine to place the viewer in a trance-like state, whereby the rational mind is seduced into accepting the fiction unfolding before it. In this environment, any transgression from the accepted norm is undesirable. If the projectionist was to place a hand in front of the lens, for example, and cast the shadows of giant fingers across the screen, it would constitute an unplanned

and unwelcome interruption to the film, which would have the result of wrenching the cinema audience out of its reverie. However, as Douglas Gordon observed, the situation in the art studio or gallery space is very different. Here, the typical passive role of the viewer may be questioned. In fact, every aspect of the means of reproduction may be questioned in this setting - and should be, because it is the artist's job to challenge preconceptions, and dogmas.

In January this year I went to an exhibition which demonstrated the creative possibilities available to video artists, should they decide to adopt a purely experimental approach towards the installation and reproduction of their work. 'Eyeball Massage', by Pipilotti Rist, was a sprawling show comprised of numerous individual exhibits, occupying two floors of London's Hayward Gallery (fig.5). As well as presenting large-scale multi-screen projections, and projections on free-hanging fabric, many of the exhibits functioned as video sculptures. These incorporated the projector along with its projected image, creating a neat circularity to the piece that was conceptually satisfying. One compact example was plastic sphere hanging from the ceiling, which contained a small projector. Facing it was a kind of amorphous shape, which functioned as a screen. The projector played a series of fuzzy abstract images, which was appropriate, as the entire piece functioned as a very successful exercise in abstraction. Almost like doodles made 3D, the entire show was made up of dozens of these exercises, each of which provided a subtly different take on the video installation. Another example worked as a still-life, with a projector shining onto a vase through a cut-out square in the side of a plastic watering can. Television screens were also used in creative and novel ways. One of the simplest examples was a television which hung from the ceiling in a translucent sack. The screen shone with a pale green light, giving the piece a strangely organic look. Another of the works featured a

steeply tapering pyramid sticking out at right angles from the wall. Visitors were encouraged to stick their heads into one of the holes cut into the underside, whereupon they found themselves in a confined cinema space.

Approaching the large multi-screen projection space, titled 'Lobe of the Lung'- which acts as a focal point for the exhibition as a whole - Adrian Searle describes the piece as 'more of an environment than an installation' (Artist Pipilotti Rist's Eyeball Massage: 'dedicated to pleasure and being alive' - video, 2011). It is easy to see how he reaches this conclusion. The space is made very welcoming and comfortable, with squashy cushions scattered near to the large screens, which entirely wraps around the field of view. The screens present bright, over-saturated images of the human form (fig.6). Rist herself has stated: 'I want to treat the body as a landscape. Our body is an environment itself' (Art For The World, 2009). It is clear from these videos that the human form is of great importance to her work, and the exhibition as a whole has a playful, non-threatening quality that encourages physical exploration of the installed works.

As well as the experimental arrangements of the video equipment, it is this quality that most impressed me about the show. For my most recent installation - titled 'We Are The Walrus' - I wanted to create an environment that was comfortable and welcoming, where visitors would feel happy to spend their time. I also wanted to create a video that was accessible and informative, yet also worked on an aesthetic level as an interesting visual experience. In order to achieve this I decided to rear-project onto a large custom-made screen. I made the screen in two parts to facilitate a split-screen presentation of my material. The decision to rear-project served two purposes. Firstly, to maximize viewing space, and to allow me to install comfortable seating. And secondly, to create a second chamber

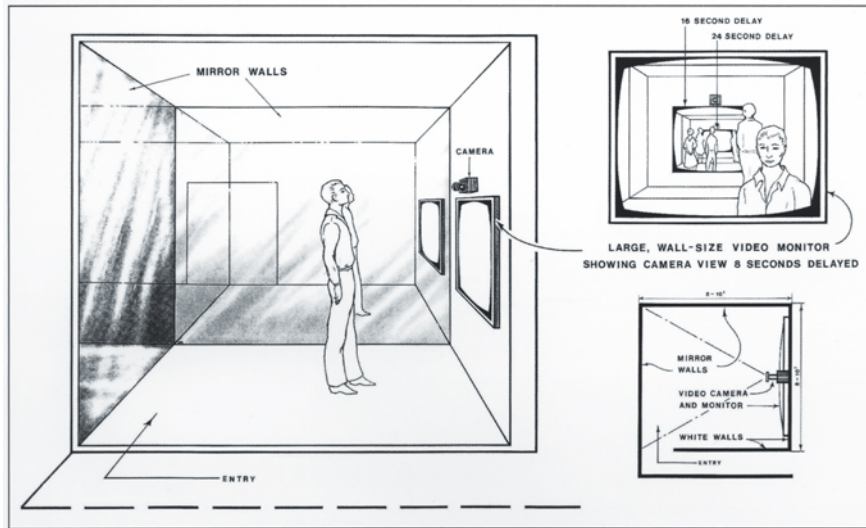
where the video equipment and speakers are located. I wanted to make this space accessible to visitors also, allowing for the possibility of shadows to be cast against the screen. I thought this might add an interesting dimension to the work, and help to strengthen the sense of identity between the visitors and the walruses that feature prominently in the video.

The project has been an interesting one, and one that will keep me occupied long after my completion of the MA. My next task is to create a stand-alone video which I will pitch to the BBC and various film festivals, documenting my three-week trip to Alaska. I feel that through my research and the video experiments I have conducted during the course of the MA, I have worked out a clear distinction between the kind of work that is suitable for exhibition in a gallery, and the kind of material which is best suited for presentation in a cinema, or on television. The best video installations are ones that fit their environments, which add something to the physical nature of the space without appearing to 'try too hard'; to be too desperate to stand out. Pipilotti Rist's installation, 'Lobe of the Lung', has no beginning or end, the seating is unobtrusive and comfortable, and the visitor naturally feels encouraged to stay for however long he or she likes. I decided that these qualities would be good to replicate in my own work. Douglas Gordon is a member of the Minimalist school where it comes to presentation, and the stark geometry of his installation designs appeals to me because it helps to focus attention on the action within the video frame. Also, his observations about the shadow-play he has seen visitors indulging in helped to influence me to make the equipment more prominent, and not to fear these occasional intrusions. Most of all, through the experience of preparing for and coordinating exhibitions during the last two years on the course, I have achieved an understanding of

what constitutes a successful, eye-catching installation, and how it can be made to work in the setting of a group show.

Appendix

Fig. 1



Dan Graham *Present Contiguous Past(s)* (1974)

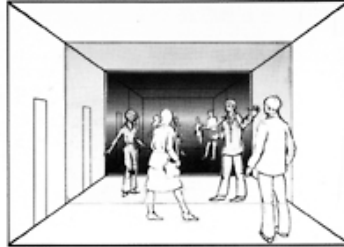
http://www.balkon.hu/2006/2006_1/foto_boris/03.jpg

Fig. 2

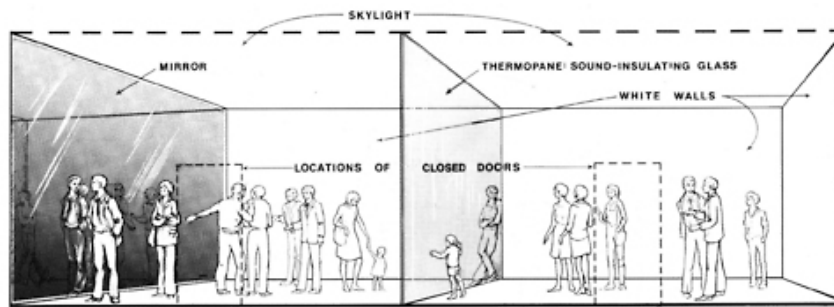
PUBLIC SPACE / TWO AUDIENCES

THE PIECE IS ONE OF MANY PAVILIONS LOCATED IN AN INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBIT WITH A LARGE AND ANONYMOUS PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE.

SPECTATORS CAN ENTER THE WORK THROUGH EITHER OF TWO ENTRANCES. THEY ARE INFORMED BEFORE ENTERING THAT THEY MUST REMAIN INSIDE FOR 30 MINUTES WITH THE DOORS CLOSED.



EACH AUDIENCE SEES THE OTHER AUDIENCE'S VISUAL BEHAVIOR, BUT IS ISOLATED FROM THEIR AURAL BEHAVIOR. EACH AUDIENCE IS MADE MORE AWARE OF ITS OWN VERBAL COMMUNICATIONS. IT IS ASSUMED THAT AFTER A TIME, EACH AUDIENCE WILL DEVELOP A SOCIAL COHESION AND GROUP IDENTITY.



Dan Graham *Public Space/Two Audiences* (1976)

<http://archiveofaffinities.tumblr.com/post/5005470083/dan-graham-public-space-two-audiences>

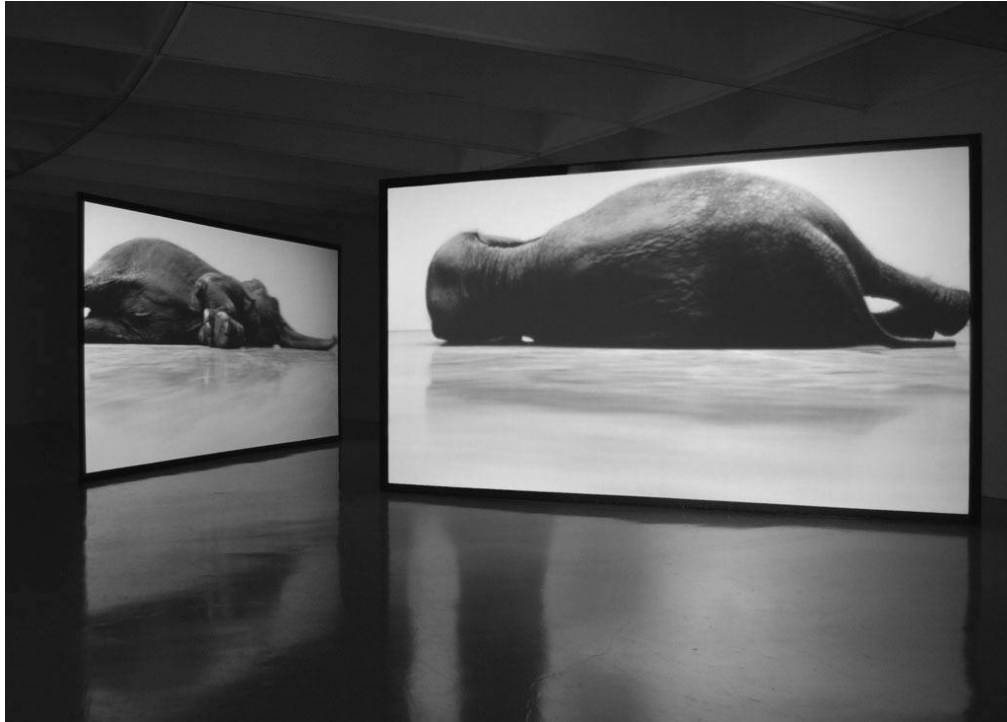
Fig.3



Douglas Gordon *Through A Looking Glass* (1999)

http://www.kunstkritikk.no/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/D.Gordon_ThrougaLooking-Glass.jpg

Fig. 4



Douglas Gordon *Play Dead; Real Time* (2003)

http://www.terminartors.com/files/artworks/4/2/6/42683/Gordon_Douglas-Play_Dead_Real_Time.jpg

Fig.5



Pipilotti Rist *Eyeball Massage* (2011)

<http://www.mydaily.co.uk/2011/09/28/pipilotti-rist-hayward-gallery-eyeball-massage/>

Fig. 6



Pipilotti Rist *Lobe of the Lung* (2011)

<http://www.mydaily.co.uk/2011/09/28/pipilotti-rist-hayward-gallery-eyeball-massage/>

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