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// Sigrid Adorf

# OPERATION VIDEO. THE USE OF IMAGES AS VISUAL AGENTS IN STRUGGLES OVER REPRESENTATION

*A facial close-up is as obscene as a genital close-up, because a face is a genital. Every image, form, or body part when seen close-up has a genital character. That is, there is something sexual about the promiscuous detail and enlargement effect of zoom.* (Baudrillard 1990: 254)



// Figure 01
Lisa Steele, Facing South, 1975.

In *Video World and Fractal Subject*, originally delivered as a talk in 1988, Jean Baudrillard considers how an electronic image comes to disrupt order. He asks whether a video stage has not displaced the mirror stage, and whether the experience of „splitting and mirror imaging, otherness and alienation" (Ibid.: 263), has not dissolved perhaps into telecommunicative omnipresence, which erases the boundaries between subject and object and „resembles transsexuality – albeit on another level" (Ibid.: 260). Baudrillard alleges, in characteristically postmodernist terms, that the circulation of electronic images causes external reality and the subject to vanish, and thus raises questions about gender and representation. Albeit unintentionally, his blending of media and gender change reveals that such attributions are contingent rather than fixed. What still needs to be investigated, however, is which other perspectives the alleged disruption of established order entailed. I argue that certain video works, above all from the 1970s, run counter to Baudrillard's stance. Rather than foregrounding a dissolving or vanishing subject, they feature one that discovers itself – albeit differently. In what follows, I discuss selected examples of early video discourse, and its different mode of seeing, to delineate some of the shifts that have occurred in the discourse on subjectivity.

**„LOOK CLOSER!“ – A CRITIQUE OF THE VIEWING-DISTANCE IN THE FIELD OF VISION** Lisa Steele, the Canadian video artist, admits at the beginning of her early work *Facing South* (1975) **(fig. 1)** that she fears drowning in detail: „Sometimes I think – I look too closely – seeing things in too much detail“ (Steele 1975). *Facing South* is a sort of personal video diary, in which Steele records her own subjectivity. Its themes include close-up observation, duration, reflecting upon individual perception, and a view of the female genitals. Rattling off these themes ad hoc cannot, however, reproduce the impression that this twenty-two minute tape makes on the viewer: it is slow, its atmosphere is unspectacular, its narrator's voice is soft, and its close-ups afford a singular insight into private surroundings and intimacy. *Facing South* opens with a date, April 14th, and a potted plant. Steele's voice-over explains that her *Angel Wing Begonia* is flowering. Addressing her viewers directly, she demands „Look closer!“, and switches on a light. What follows is a close-up of the blossom, in front of which a large magnifier is slowly placed, blurring the image completely. Refocusing the magnifier renders the blossom splendidly concrete and almost haptic. Examining the blossom at length, Steele observes that it is pink, similar to the inside of a young girl's mouth. This pictorial association confers color upon the black-and-white shot. Seemingly looking her viewers in the eye, she emphatically reassures us: „I'm quite sure of this.“ Steele goes on to closely observe and ponder the fledgling watercress seedlings in a pot standing on the window sill; what follows are close-ups of her face – ear, eye, nose, and mouth – and ultimately a change of scenery: Steele's profile appears at the top edge of the screen, her hair tied back with a headscarf. She dreamily bends down toward the two-week-old plants, she tells us, and slowly bites off their seed leaves. The close-up shows her tongue feel its way forward and draw the leaf toward her mouth, before biting it off and beginning to chew it. As we watch her chew, her voice-over tells us that the leaves taste spicy and smell of pepper. Following a shift to some buttered bread, upon which she places the fledgling leaves, what appears next is an initially extremely blurred shot of the female genital area. While she moves the magnifier back into picture from the top, Steele says slowly: „But here, seeing here clearly is difficult. Even under magnification. The Clitoris remains hidden between two folds of skin“ (Ibid.). Magnification gradually renders distinct the excerpt, until a very accurate close-up of the labia surrounded by dark pubic hair comes into view. The magnifier disappears again at the top of the screen, and the shot remains unfocused for a few

seconds. The camera subsequently observes Steele feed her turtles with Begonia seeds; the close-ups of the turtles snatching at the food and Steele biting off the watercress leaves are unsettlingly similar. The tape ends with a slow walk up to the roof terrace, dawning light, close-ups of flower and plant boxes, and the somewhat cryptic sentence: „At noon rising locate the distance to view."

The distinctive features of *Facing South* – Steele's attention to detail, the magnifier, the dilatory movements, closely observing delicate plants grow, the eroticism of her unspectacular gestures, turtle-feeding, and the zoomed-in vagina – all come alive through their contrast with what usually characterizes the field of vision and the dominance of sight. She appears to be too close. The distance customarily afforded by sight dissolves and makes way for the pleasure in coming so close to things that they assume a haptic quality and solicit touch. The human eye, hands, skin, and sense of taste are appealed to in equal measure, and seduced into feeling. But *Facing South* allows no fantasies to coalesce, since it is too slow – and too analytical. Its brittle narrative and mysteriousness inhibit any sensual approach to matters. While viewers are kept at arm's length, they are prompted to reflect upon their sense of proximity. Unlike Baudrillard, feminist artists saw video as promising the dissolution of the powerful boundary between subject and object in its determinate gender terms. Its distinction between the male gaze and its female object evidently threatened the stability of the established order of representation. Steele's magnified view of detail, into which she inserts a reference to the invisible clitoris without further explanation, plays with the craving for knowledge in Western, visual culture. For instance, Linda Hentschel's *Pornotopische Techniken des Betrachtens* (Hentschel 2001) establishes that phantasmatic cross-fading, fuelled by a sense of advancing as far as an essential kernel of truth, assembles into a mythic complex. Firstly, images of the female genital area as a threshold to truth on the one hand; and secondly, the curiosity derived from gazing at the (violent) prizing open of the female body to divulge its secret. Steele's subtle rendition of gaze and clitoris quite evidently alludes to the problematic amalgamation of knowledge and lust. In *Facing South*, she parades the magnifier, an optical instrument of knowledge, in a futile attempt to draw closer to things. Under magnification, they appear to remain elusive rather than take shape. Steele's close-up, staged as a latently neurotic stance and personal tick, can be understood as a perspective complementing the sovereignty of the controlling, distanced gaze. As such, it produces discursive tension.

**INSCRIPTIONS ON THE BODY AS INCISIONS IN THE VISUAL FIELD** In *Birthday Suit. With Scars and Defects,* made a year earlier, Steele focuses the camera fully on the various disfigurations on her body that bear witness to a history of injury. The video now renders readable these infractions as signs of that history as it inscribes itself on the subject over time. Thus, she observes, „September 22nd 1947 to September 22nd 1974. In honour of my birthday, I'm going to show you my birthday suit, with scars and defects." While her voice-over introduces the work, the camera looks at her thighs. Steele crosses the room to the opposite corner, shows herself in full, and returns to her original position in front of the camera. She kneels down slowly, points her outstretched index finger at a small, dot-shaped scar on her neck, utters „1947", and explains that this is where a goiter was excised after she was born **(fig. 2)**. Her index finger circles around the spot several times in overly slow caressing movements, which she subsequently repeats over and over. In brief, protocol-like sentences she recounts a series of past events, and concludes her report on each by mentioning how old she was when a particular wound was inflicted upon her body – the scar left behind after a blood transfusion on her foot when she was three months old; the frayed scar beneath her hip after crashing her tricycle; her smashed fingertip, caused by a falling pipe. She lists many other scars, including the most recent, a dot-size operation scar indicating the spot where a benign tumor was removed from her right breast a few weeks earlier. Throughout the entire twelve-minute take, the camera remains static and locked at the same angle. Length remains uncut and the soundtrack consists entirely of the sounds and voice of the take. Notwithstanding the private and unspectacular setting, the strict form of *Birthday Suit. With Scars and Defects* – its seemingly rehearsed choreography, the chronological ordering of memory, and the unvarying repetition of gestures – unsettles the viewer's spontaneous impression



// Figure 02
Lisa Steele, Birthday Suit: With Scars and Defects, 1974.

of an unedited sequence. Directly addressing the viewer as „you", moreover, contrasts with the otherwise private setting. Such gaze alignment, which the fixed camera position epitomizes, opens up the scene toward a literally „exhibitionist" affirmation of self.

Compared to the alleged neutralizing of the artist's body in 1970s conceptual body art, Steele's work seemingly aims at achieving close physical proximity. Here a concrete human subject discloses and explains itself. It also acknowledges its dependency on being seen and able to narrate, substantiate, and record its own history. The repeatedly uttered „you" invites viewers to engage in the search for identification. Direct address constitutes both a threshold kept low and the seductive momentum of empty form that viewers can allegedly fill in. Accepting the position offered by such form, however, inevitably involves viewers in a dialogue that unmistakably establishes that subjectivity is negotiated through both interaction and performance. Steele's work reveals the paradoxical structure of not-being-alone-with-oneself in being alone. Intimate, playful, and disconcerting sequences blend here with direct solicitations of the viewer's gaze: „I will show you." This specific relationship with the camera brings into play an interesting dynamic. For even if the setting appeals to an intimate knowledge of the hidden instances of self-dramatization, it is nevertheless clearly distinct, precisely because the camera and artistic framework place it within another system of meaning. What emerges is a particular kind of performance. It recites gestures, poses, and formulae. Steele adopts a theatrical approach and makes use of the boundary between private and public performance – unknown as such in the theatre, but which the *intimacy* of the video set facilitates. From the outset, when Steele approaches the camera and kneels down before it to focus it on her neck, the gaze moves up her body and scans it – akin to classic voyeuristic cinematography. But since the camera is evidently fixed, and consequently appears not to reproduce a subjective, wandering, and desiring gaze, the classic constellation of gazes is perturbed. What moves is the performer, who apparently knows which part of her body she allows the viewer to see and when. This renders helpless a voyeuristic perspective, engendering an enchained or spellbound gaze that must subordinate itself to its desire, and moreover, becomes identifiable.

Mieke Bal considers the video work of the Belgian artist Lili Dujourie an attempt to work on history, and thus delineates an operative field of images that transcends merely subjective, purely aesthetic, or solely technical issues (Bal 1998). Dujourie also produced

her work in the early 1970s, and its form and content closely resemble Steele's. Both artists position themselves in the field of vision of a static camera set up in private surroundings. Her movements are extremely slow, the videos are without sound, and, as Bal emphasizes, they are about gazing at a beautiful young woman posing. Bal explains that Dujourie's poses before the camera and for the gallery, which she likens to the depiction of females in painting, establish a distinctive movement: these image operations work on the mnemonic image, that is, an idea that has inscribed itself in (cultural) memory like an inevitable matrix. The paradox of representation, its double bind, declares itself to be a political task: now, it is the images that operate and that must be operated on. Even if it is evident, as Benjamin observes, that „a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye" (Benjamin 1968: 236), the (camera) eye cannot dissociate itself from the body. Neither the idea of a technical image assuming an entirely independent life of its own, nor the reference to the unconscious, that is, the uncontrollable domain in which images become active, can prevent us from recognizing that we see *in* and *through* images, and that looking at things and bringing them into view remains an important political task. For, as Mieke Bal repeatedly cites the theorist Kaja Silverman, „looking closely amounts to embedding an image in an ever-changing matrix of unconscious memory" (Bal 1998: 64).



// Figure 03
Lynn Hershman, Roberta Construction Chart #2, 1974.

In what follows, I discuss the „mythic beings" that female artists „created" in the 1970s to propound a different view of themselves and their surroundings. In doing so, I seek to clarify which ideas were associated with a transgressive proximity envisaged as becoming effective in the social sphere and everyday life. Adrian Piper's „art as catalyst" builds on the idea of the interactive relationship between artist, work, and viewer. Rather than considering the work a self-contained, autotelic entity, she stresses that it only exists to produce change. I refer to such change as *Othering*, since its transformative potential depends on experiencing an encounter with the Other.

## INTER(RE)ACTIONS – „A TRANSFORMATION RESULTING IN THE SUBJECT FROM THE ASSIMILATION OF AN IMAGE"

In the early 1970s, Lynn Hershman conjured up *Roberta Breitmore*, aged thirty, divorced, with $1800 in savings, and who

relocated from Cleveland to San Francisco in 1975. Roberta had long blond hair, wore plenty of make-up, and donned dresses, skirts, and knee-high boots. Roberta epitomized the male-coded fantasy of an attractive, mysterious, and yet average female, whose recognizable identity consisted of wearing the same costumes, acquiring a driver's license, a credit card, and seeing a psychiatrist. Initially, only Hershman appeared in public as Roberta – later she allowed others to represent this *anti-body* (s. Hershman 1990).

Hershman calls her personification a „breathing simulacrum". She repeatedly stresses that Roberta and Lynn are not one and the same, and that this persona should not be understood merely as a dramatized alter ego. So who was, or *is*, Roberta? She has without doubt become a fantasy that has assumed bodily contours. But whose fantasy? The relationship between *ready-made* and artistic intervention remains indeterminate. Hershman's dramatization searches for the intensity of the given space to integrate its storyline into already existing narratives **(fig. 3)**.

In the 1970s, art confronted the ineffectual or even *powerless* perspective of film spectators with its ideal of interactivity, focusing specifically on the meaning of artistic practices and objects in the public sphere. In *The Fantasy Beyond Control* (1990), Hershman explains that through accumulating and acting as a repository of cultural artifacts, and through interacting directly with life, Roberta constituted a double-sided mirror that reflected social tendencies.[1)] Hershman conceives a figure that became a tool for cultural analysis due to her mundane existence. Roberta opened up a fissure in the reality of encounters – the mask she provided to the reality of self-perception created a difference and also could have a transformative effect. It is precisely this relationship between the (political) possibility of change and encounters with the Other that bring forth the notion of *Othering* [Veranderung].[2)] Considering artistic work as media, or even better, as change agents, amounts to understanding their practice of displacing images as political; that is, art becomes actively involved in negotiating cultural processes and producing inclusions and exclusions, or revelation and denial.[3)]




// Figure 04
Adrian Piper, The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women #1, 1975.

Starting out from the clichéd image of the Afro-American city slicker, Adrian Piper's series *The Mythic Being* (1974/75) developed this theme further **(fig. 4)**. Donning an Afro wig,

1)
„By accumulating artifacts from culture and interacting directly with life, she became a two-way mirror that reflected societal biases experienced through time. Roberta was always seen as a surveillance target" (Hershman 1990: 267).

2)
Translator's note: the artificial term „Veranderung" (Othering) plays with its almost homonymic double „Veränderung" (transformation) to accentuate a semantic nuance.

3)
„If art is political, it is so only when the following occurs: if the spaces and times it divides, and the forms it assumes to occupy them, are subordinate to the factors that define a political community, namely its apportionments of space and time, subject and object, private and public, and ability and inability" (Rancière 2006: 94–98).

sunglasses, and proverbial macho antics, Piper stage-managed a virtually complementary figure in photographically documented performances, such as small drawings with speech bubbles containing passages from her diary that she published in *Village Voice*. The efficacy of Piper's *Mythic Being* hinges on its hybrid status between autobiography and fiction. She refers to her notion of *art as catalyst* to explain her quest for efficacy (Piper 2002: 127ff.). Drawing on Aristotle, she borrows the term „catalyst" from chemistry to emphasize the function of art as an agent that provokes (significant) change or reaction. She refutes the notion of the work as a stable agent, whose existence remains unchanged before and after the reaction, and disputes its existence apart from the reaction.[4)]

Eleanor Antin, who created four polarized figures – the nurse, black diva, king, and ballerina – to stage herself, explains in *Dialogue with a Medium* (1974) that the transforming effect of such work depends on the nature of the medium. Media have paradoxical effects, she observes, in that they both create and reduce distance. Their function as catalysts resides in effectively occupying the space in-between, in which they separate and connect elements – true to the chemical notion of reaction. The significance of video to effect such interruption and figural constitution arose from the following paradox: while its allegedly closed circuit provided intimacy, it also remained open for the virtual synthesis of various image spaces and times. Conferring the camera's gaze upon the viewer results in a double-sided situation: on the one hand, the scene addresses the anticipated gaze of an imaginary audience; on the other, such anticipation spellbinds viewers. Steele's video work reflects upon the semiotic field spanning shot, medium, and observation both in conceptual and experimental terms.[5)] Her dramatization addresses a gaze cast upon her – one that she does not see, but can anticipate. While she can preempt this gaze, she is unable to either realign her performance with the viewer's reaction or change it accordingly. In this regard, Walter Benjamin speaks of a detachable mirror image, through which early cinema dissociated itself from the actor for the first time and brought a detached image before an audience.

But does this conception actually correspond to the function of a mirror? Can mirror images really be fixed and detached from the mirroring process? Originally, whether water or glass, mirrors were considered ephemeral and empty; what was mirrored existed merely while it remained in close spatial and temporal proximity

4)
The value of a work could thus be gauged according to how forceful the change it effects is [...]. The work as such does thus not exist, unless it functions as medium of change between artist and viewer" (Piper 2002: 127).

5)
Steele explains that her use of video is not accidental, but conceptual: „Emotion is motion and drama is the passage of time. When I make my tapes this is all that I can think about and consider. The structure is intuitively set up at the beginning. I just pour the content into it. But the content is the tape itself" (Gale 1976: 119).

– that is, within the visual field of the person mirrored. The photographic quality of film, however, intervenes precisely at this point, enabling transfer in both the technical and psychoanalytic senses of the word: technically, as noted, transfer denotes shifting or displacing a situation in spatial and temporal terms; psychoanalytically, however, it means that the actor's or performer's „mirror image" becomes transferable, that is, it now operates as its viewer's mirror image. But what happens if we see ourselves in someone else's (mirror) image? Feminist film theory in particular has analyzed the distinct capacity of film images to evoke identification – both through the characters and gaze featured. The mirror function establishes the catalytic connection between image and viewing.
To conclude, the examples of 1970s video work discussed here purposefully reflect upon what is meant to remain unconscious in classic cinema. Such work conceives mirroring oneself in the Other neither as a straightforward process, supposed to make viewers believe that they come up against themselves, nor that gazing through a camera can be likened to what the naked eye sees. Rather, such mirroring paradoxically involves both the identificatory allure of proximity and an array of opposite effects, such as distancing, alienation, and thus also disidentification. The emphatic blending of real and fictitious elements in the works of Hershman, Piper, and Antin also functions as the premise for their viewers' effective encounter with the image. What distinguished video feedback (electronic circuit) was that it raised questions about the self both in temporal and spatial terms. Video was used as an interposed screen or mask. Similar to a double-sided mirror, such masking evokes a twofold reflection reaction. Contrary to Baudrillard's fears, the video stage amounts less to a fragmentation or even vanishing of the subject than it does to a way of enlightening us about the function of the mirror stage, as defined by Lacan:
„*One can understand the mirror stage as* identification *in the true psychoanalytic sense of the word: as the transformation resulting in the subject from the assimilation of an image.*"
(Lacan 1986: 64)

(Translated by Mark Kyburz).

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## // Photographic credits

**Fig. 1:** Lisa Steele, Facing South, 1975; b/w video, 22 min, sound. © Vtape Toronto.
**Fig. 2:** Lisa Steele, Birthday Suit: With Scars and Defects, 1974. b/w video, 13 min, sound. © Vtape Toronto.
**Fig. 3:** Lynn Hershman, Roberta Construction Chart #2, 1974. In: Double Life. Identität und Transformation in der zeitgenössischen Kunst (2001). Exh. Cat. Generali Foundation Wien. Wien, König, p. 115.
**Fig. 4:** Adrian Piper, The Mythic Being: Cruising White Women #1, 1975. In: Piper, Adrian (1996): Out of Order, Out of Sight. Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968–1992. Cambridge, Mass./London, MIT Press, p. 148.

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