

**SPIRAL/TRANSLATION/SKIN: AN AESTHETIC HISTORY OF
THE INCOMPLETE VIDEO IMAGE**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the categories of form and content, especially as they have been questioned and transformed by the artistic application of video technology. From a poststructuralist, historical perspective, the problem of form and content is engaged as an instance of interpretative crisis in the visual arts within the aesthetic theories of G.W.F Hegel, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man; and within the writing of many important video critics and contemporary feminist thinkers. Understood through analogies with theories of the philosophy of history, translation, and the body, video and multimedia works by Mona Hatoum, Jan Peacock and Sharon Switzer are analysed as attempts to (de)figure racial, sexual and historical difference and their symbolic disavowal in Western cultures. By identifying formal strategies at the material level, these artworks are seen as radical political experiments to renew the terms through which we connect art with the social field.

Keywords: video art, form, history, art history, Hegel, aesthetics, Benjamin, translation, psychoanalysis, feminism, theories of the body, surface.

I have been trying for so long to show that side of life I believe in - to live in that space - to understand and use the language of that space as the formulas of my work. This is the real space - the danger place, under our feet, our nose, below our belly, after our death, before our birth, which we only get to glimpse occasionally.

Bill Viola, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*

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PREFACE

How can social, sexual, racial and historical difference be represented without being obliterated? How can I avoid recreating an order of signification that makes the illusory nature of perfect mirroring undetectable? Furthermore, in terms of visual art, how could I acknowledge the normative force of our visions of history and epistemology, without reifying a field of vision that reduces and mortifies? What are the particularities of this problem when considering the electronic, instantaneous, and moving video image? These questions become ethical ones when we ask, in thinking about cultural representations as sites of constant epistemological slippage, can we also respond adequately to the political and social needs of marginalised groups in society? Only through an endless process of questioning can we adequately address the paradoxes of the struggle for expanding the limits of what can be spoken and imaged. Elucidating this modern representational impasse is always best done as an intervention into a specific set of practices, and through the elaboration of a set of framing propositions, propositions that will then invariably be transformed in the process of thinking them through.

To begin, I want to insist that my thesis represents an attempt to respond to contemporary social realities in the Western world, which are distinguished by the hegemonic oppression of minorities, an alarming lack of left-wing and grass-roots political movements, and an increasingly uncritical embrace of commodity culture. In the present moment, I believe, there is a need, within artistic and critical practices of all kinds, to find new concepts with which to make the effort to respond to those realities more successful. With this basic leap of faith, which I admit begins as an answer and emerges as a question repeatedly in the following pages, I struggle to find concepts that, simply put, can point me to the limits of discourse. Continuing the movement of feminist theory in North America, I try to stage a critical awareness of the historicity of concepts and artworks. Displacing chronological and disciplinary borders, I focus on the

repetitions of concepts and artworks that reveal spirals and anamorphoses in narratives, images and bodies.

Approaching alterity obliquely, then, the first chapter deals with the possibilities and obstacles encountered when trying to write a history of video and its critical and artistic interpretation. Using Hegel's *Aesthetics*, I set the stage for thinking the complex relationships between video art, the social field, modernism, art historical categories and the stories told about art by what many critics have called "the last metaphysicist." I arrive at the limit of Hegel, the death of art, by considering the history of video art as analogous to the history of modernity in that it is a double history of the incompletion of an overdetermined self-transcendence. Exemplary of this is the process whereby, when Hegel thinks the absolute, he inevitably contemplates the death of his own thought insofar as he posits the death of others' thought. Hegel is seen, finally, as a thinker whose sublation of style for content is undercut by the genre mutability and split conceptualisation of history that I find in his aesthetic theory. Importantly, this notion of the spectre is culled largely from the artistic vocabulary I draw out from a video work from 1984 by Mona Hatoum.

Reaching (for) the limit of Hegel's *Aesthetics* leads me to continue to respond to contemporary art practice and theory (an endless exercise, no doubt), through engaging the thought of Walter Benjamin, in the search for a diachronic concept with which to approach alterity and the contemporary operations of video art. The opacification of the time-based video image and the layered digital image through installation and the doubling of the screen, is seen as analogous to Benjamin's diachronic concepts of translation and form as change. Arguing that Benjamin's thought can help us find an ethical response to the dilemma of writing or filming history, I try to present the mediation that is language (in its expanded definition as a system of physical and cultural signs) as an incomplete but necessary part of how to make difference, and make that difference be political. Translating and writing the screen (in literature and video) and

physical space (in installation) should be used to advantage in the juncture where social life is symbolised. In this chapter, I also make political claims about the intertextuality of video; and about the non-separation between the conceptual or fictional image/metaphor and the imagistic one. I look at pieces by Jan Peacock and Sharon Switzer that, in my view, illustrate this "ethical aesthetics."

Another crucial aspect of this cutting or thwarting of the video image or literary metaphor as an opening onto a terrain of inversion, difference and materiality is found in the intense discussion of the body in contemporary feminist art and theory. Very much a kind of threshold discourse, "body theory" speaks about the complex relations between the reproduced image, language, and ethics. In drawing attention to the surface-body as a particularly slippery area, I say in the final chapter that feminism, as a discursive lens, needs to create new categories to understand the imbrication of the body, language and form as change, especially when it comes to artforms forging new vocabularies, such as video. Electronic and digital arts, and the contemporary novel are seen as areas of cultural production where the surface-body emerges as a central category in the continued struggle for access and voice in the deconstruction of simple identities and didactic images and stories.

My thesis is thus impelled by the need to reorient the terms of debate within art history and critical theory, because of the political desire to be able to respond to crossings of identity, chronology and morphology. I see this desire as embodied in the figuration/ defiguration vacillation, concluding that the function of the work of art is to confuse these and bring into play *more* differences and experiences.

I

**THE VIDEO AESTHETIK OF BREAKING:
THE IN-BETWEENNESS OF IMAGE AND NARRATIVE**

Introduction

Each epoch not only dreams of the next, but also, in dreaming, strives toward the moment of waking. It bears its end in itself and unfolds it - as Hegel already saw - with ruse. In the convulsions of the commodity economy we begin to recognise the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.

Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century"

In this chapter, I focus on how video artists have stretched the medium materially, in order to show that, historically, video is opaque, incomplete and deconstructive. My claim is that often, video works to make the content more present in the *way* the medium is used, deliberately confusing form and content. Such confusion can be spoken of as a kind of breaking of the (never-existent) perfect image. This aspect of video is significant insofar as it questions the very boundaries of what constitutes art, as it blurs lines between documentary, autobiography, TV, installation, home video, performance and experimental film.¹ Although it makes perfunctory allusion to television, video also has

¹ The relation that video art has to film is quite complex, and is therefore not a topic that I will be able to do justice to here. The most striking thing for me, when reading radical film criticism and watching experimental film, is the amount of strategies that some video shares with the most experimental films in trying to politicise aesthetic elements. The argument I am making about video is not more or less valid in view of the fact that as a video-theorist, I am always influenced by avant-garde film (much of it feminist) discourse (see note 18). Nevertheless, for my purposes, it will also be important to remember that as it has historically been used, video technology can be distinguished from film in several important ways that I hope will become clear. Paul Virilio has said, quoting Hitchcock, that "unlike cinema, with television there is no time for *suspense*, you can only have *surprise*." This is the very definition of the paradoxical logic of the videoframe which privileges the accident, the surprise, over the durable substance of the message" (1994: 65). Theorists have thematised the difference between film and video as both historical and technological, but technological change should always be thought in historical context. Yet technological traits and historical uses, meanings and contexts are ways of identifying both continuity and contrast between film and video. For articles that deal with the juncture of film and video, see Lageira (1996), Belton (1996), Mellencamp (1990) and Ross (1995).

complex historical links to the refusal of figuration proper to modern art practices embodied by the ready-made and abstract painting. Often referred to as "politicised modernism,"² central to video practices is an important ethical opening onto burning social questions of access and visibility. For insofar as video is marked by a mutability and difference at the level of genre and viewing, it carries a contestatory relation to the artworld and its marketing logic,³ as well as to the critical self-understanding prevalent in art history. As such, video is intimately tied to installation, and indeed, video artists have paid much attention to the framing of their work. For instance, I try in my reading to understand how Palestinian-born, British-based video artist Mona Hatoum has used the video-monitor, or the screen, in self-conscious ways in order to draw attention to the framing elements of the medium.

First, I will explore these various representational openings and gaps in terms of video's role in a series of historical and interpretative junctures, then, as a function of a crisis of its form and content, and lastly, as a juxtaposition of the Hegelian overdetermination of art with Hatoum's use of the screen. I interface my theorising on video with Hegel's narrativisation of style, because in my view, the possibility of querying the ideological and metaphysical separation of form and content is linked to an interrogation of one of the most influential, yet mostly unread, theories of historical style, Hegel's *Aesthetics*. In Hatoum and in Hegel, I locate an interest less in what art is able to tell than in *how* it tells it. However, if Hatoum's video speaks to the threshold where each of us is exposed to the difference(s) of the other, Hegel inadvertently stumbles upon it.

² Rodowick, cited in Cubitt (1993: 27).

³ One principal feature of this contestation lies in the fact that video is almost exclusively distributed through the alternative system of video distribution banks that has been established across North America as a vital organ of exchange in art communities. This network emerged largely as a response to the marginalisation of video and other post-object artforms in mainstream museum and commercial gallery culture. A sure sign of the importance of video distribution centres to the development and impact of video art is the practice - seen in most video anthologies and exhibition catalogues - of including a list of distribution centres as an appendix, usually called a videography or a video index.

Toward a video-language: an incoherent history

In attempting to come to terms with the complex set of cameratic and installational strategies usually grouped together as "video art," much important video criticism has focused on the contradictions of video's history.⁴ The conflicts evident when approaching video and its artistic application have often been observed in terms of a breaking or splitting of the video image. So, taking up both presentation and viewing, theorists of video have brought into play a whole range of spectral notions in order to come to grips with the fact that, as Sean Cubitt asserts, "the gap between the viewer and the viewed, between image and commentary, is at the heart of the video relation" (1993: 12). The most remarkable thing about the multitude of efforts to write video's history is the tension between the seeming lack of language available to "speak" video, and the necessity of "saying" something, making a history for and of the medium. In a seminal essay from 1986, Canadian video critic Jody Berland asserted that the "emergence of video art as a distinct and self-conscious practice is the emergence of a language that is not yet a

⁴ I should acknowledge that even while trying to theorise the connotative and contextual aspects of video, there exist so many forms of video that I am bound to circumscribe the terrain in which I explore "video art" mainly because I am interested in how video art comes up against art history. The wedding video, the safe sex video, the video-version of a film, the moving screen-saver or internet site, the video-taped therapy session, the community project video, (the list is practically endless)—are all examples of video practice. I do not wish to exclude any of these when I speak generally of video, indeed, the focus on the everyday and the strong foundational roots in communities are examples of the radical democratic possibilities of video. Several rich communitarian traditions have arisen in the area of identity and community politics, especially where artist/activists have needed to educate, in areas such as AIDS work (and more generally, queer identity), sex education, youth projects, and violence against women. For work addressing video with direct autobiographical, documentary and pedagogical concerns, see Gever (1993), Bad Object Choices (1991), and essays in Renov and Suderberg (1996), Hall and Fifer (1990). However, it is worthwhile to point out that some critics have also examined the down-side of constructing a set of discourses around video that uncritically embrace notions of "empowerment" and "giving voice" to disenfranchised groups (Burnett 1996). So, while such videos are an invaluable part of the role that video plays in our societies, I will be working with a definition of "video" that perhaps above all engages its expanded forms, which include installation and multimedia work. For in this broad framework, video works to examine its own intertextuality: with its own form, other artforms, and changing discursive concepts. This is not to say that the videotapes I am focusing on are not grounded in experiential concerns, rather, their aesthetic dimension is itself purposively marked as political. In writing (about) video, I aim to break some new ground in the often stale discussion of political versus aesthetic strategies in art-making and writing.

language" (12). More recently, in an reading of Gary Hill's work, Jacques Derrida has put this insight in broader terms, claiming that to "take into account...what happens to language through the video event" is also to recognise that a "new art" such as video, "may be recognised by the fact that it is not recognised" (1996: 75). In other words, video "language" is characterised as paradoxically bleeding into the cracks of discourse. What I want to draw attention to here is that, over the past three decades, there have been marked splits in the way that video practice has come to be modelled. It is difficult to speak of these splits as chronological or developmental; it seems impossible, in other words, to "sum up" the history of video discourse for the same reason that it is so crucial to try: we have the wrong, or not enough, words with which to do it. Indeed, the urgency of making a history for video has always accompanied the artistic use of the medium; yet, artists and critics alike still complain about "the paucity of material addressing video" (Renov and Suderburg ix). But what can we make of these absences and slippages, apparently commonplace in video?

It may well be best to see if this paradox was part of how video is (and was) apprehended from the outset. The birth myth of video art is well-known: artists first took up the video medium in New York at the end of the 1960's when the first videocameras became available as a more inexpensive and rapid option for recording, editing and playback as compared to filmcameras. Particularly in these nascent moments of the artform, artists who opened the door to video in their practice brought their concerns from other media to bear as they filmed; and thus video inherited a set of inflections in how and what it came to express. At the same time, the new directions that aesthetic and political concerns took were tied to the specificities of the medium. The exploration of one aspect of this material specificity prevailed in early video work, as many artists quite literally used the camera as an uncanny mirror of sorts. Video technology allows the instant viewing that characterises the transfixing mirror image, and indeed, critics

currently refer to this, more or less critically, as video's "mirror stage."⁵ Many of the well-known video-maker Bruce Nauman's early pieces are exemplary of this type of work, such as in *Revolving Upside Down*, where the artist films himself turning around on one foot for sixty minutes. It should also be pointed out that video artists have since the seventies voiced ambivalent feelings about the material specificities of video. While often a result of small budgets, Toronto video artist Almerinda Travassos has said, for example, that as a result of rough edits and instant viewing, "video allows for more risk-taking, more control and less compulsion to self-censor" (cited in B. Ross 393).

In many respects, video's inheritance is clearly akin to the emergence of photography; and often, in the face of the lack of language of support, writers have paralleled video's struggle for self-definition as an artform with that of photography. According to Paul Virilio, "like most technical innovations, photography delivers a hybrid." A combination of "a substantial art heritage," "industrial applications," and "science...insisting that photography was first and foremost an objective document, hard evidence" (1994: 48) made it impossible to speak of photography without engaging the fierce debate about its origin and its destiny. With video, the issues around which this conflict centre differ in significant ways from those in photography, however. Differences between them are both technological and historical. According to Mark Mayer, video is, unlike photography ("its photochemical ancestor"), "instantaneous, readily accessible and reusable" (17). Moreover, the insistent temporality and material ephemerality that marked video made it a process-oriented art. Early on, it was most often used as an impermanent record of a performance, or a temporary part of an

⁵ Of course, Rosalind Krauss' 1976 hypothesis in "Video: the Aesthetics of Narcissism" postulating the aesthetic limitations of the video medium, due to its narcissistic and insular structure, was greatly resisted then as now. Mostly, critics understand her essay to be a simplification of the issues at stake in video self-representation, generally agreeing that she uses the metaphor of Lacan's infamous "mirror stage" rather uncritically herself. See, for example, Bruce Ferguson's article on Colin Campbell (303-4). Since Krauss' initial focus on the body, artists and critics alike have had to admit that the use of one's own body in video is multiply meaningful, as I hope will become clear in my examination of Mona Hatoum's work in the present and the last chapter.

installation (Gale 64). Of course, photographs have been used to immortalise moments in time since its inception; however, in the area of video, these records became signs of intensive subjective investigations. Particular to video's so-called "narcissistic phase" was the positioning of the viewer as eavesdropper, undercutting the claim to empirical recording most often made by photography.

These characteristics materialise - like photography's instant ability to throw modern debates about craftsmanship into obsolescence - as threats to the aesthetic status quo. Yet, video clearly emerged at a different historical juncture than photography. In the early part of the century, says Mayer, "the concept of the vanguard art was born about the same time as photographers began presenting themselves more aggressively as independent producers of fine art." Thus, a 1913 show by Alfred Stieglitz, was "a demonstration of what photography is and painting is not" (19). So, while video shares with photography the working through of a never-ending debate about function and agency within the artworld, and the relation of this agency to collective political circumstances, the form this took (and takes) was (and is) quite distinct with video. For instead of slowly proceeding to insert video into the museum canon, video artists and critics have from the first engaged in the medium's peculiar relation to social reality, namely its "inextricable immersion in both mass media and the everyday" (Zippay 1993: 8). Clearly, it is partly in regard to its moving image and its form (the TV set) that art history has placed video on one side, and photography and film on the other. Video could never aspire to be a "fine" art like photography or film: it was (and is) cheap-looking, pixelated, lacking the crispness of boundaries and depth-illusion that characterised its forerunners. But if we place the form of video in historical context, we should observe that video appeared in a "postmodern" moment,⁶ coming onto the art scene at a time when

⁶ Insofar as the "postmodern" is used to group together a large number of theories about changing cultural conditions in Western society roughly since the late sixties, it often escapes the definition it is supposed to provide. As a result, the "postmodern" encompasses often incommensurable critical postures, at which point the term itself seems to denote the failure of mobilisation of a strong radical movement in society, a problem that it is presumably meant to redress. Nevertheless, the term works to signify an important

the readymade, and in its footsteps, pop art, had forced artists and critics alike to question the facile division between "high" art and the social field, an assumption that had become commonplace among both anti-modern defeatists (art has failed, the avant-garde is dead), and modern elitists (art must separate itself from trash culture).⁷

Of course, a principal dimension of this challenge was provided by the simple fact that video art was from the first bound on one side by broadcast television. Briefly, artistic and commercial uses of video can be distinguished by the attention given to form. With its insistence on the transparency of information, TV characteristically relies on making its form irrelevant, essentially by rendering it invisible. In contrast, video art insists on making its own mediating force a central preoccupation in its search for relevance in the contemporary world.⁸ In the context of an artworld still grappling with the ramifications of the scientificistic positivism attached to photography and film, video artists thus joined the struggle, begun by Dada and Jean-Luc Godard's experimental film, to reveal via montage editing practices that the screen excludes as much as it includes. These historical concerns surfaced in the early seventies as video artists took up with force the question of the spectator that had been raised on a consistent basis since Brecht's *Threepenny Novel* (1928). Video theory has constantly emphasised that, using strategies worked and re-worked since the 1970's, many video works have consisted of "experiments [that] subverted dominant notions of spectatorship" (Zippay 6).⁹ More

problematisation of what a radical democratic intervention can be. I use the term sparingly, however, because as both video and its attendant problems of interpretation both preceded and coincided with the "postmodern," the term lacks heuristic value, and serves its purpose mostly as a flag.

⁷ The "defeatist" position perhaps exemplified by Peter Bürger(1984), and the "elitist" one by Clement Greenberg (1961).

⁸ See "Medium, frame, politics of (de)formation" in this chapter for an elucidation of form in this context.

⁹ In general, I will assume that the area of reception and spectatorship is "troubled" in the sense that it is a particularly difficult area in which to avoid the slippage between discussing an idealised and particular receiver or artist, and an open notion of objecthood. Clearly, there is a risk in instrumentalising the production of art by assuming that it is always directed toward someone. Indeed, the intense debate elaborating the distinction between the active role of the spectator, contingent on an incomplete and theatrical artwork, versus the contemplative, indifferent spectator, presumably made possible by the self-contained artwork, is at least as old as modernity itself. For a useful account of the trajectory of this debate in the thought of Hegel, Rieg, Foucault and Fried, see Iversen (1993: 125-47). I want to agree with Iversen that this debate has often lacked conclusion because ultimately, the distinctions on which it is based are

specifically, it was influenced by a wide range of process-oriented artforms of the period, such as agitprop, fluxus, body and performance art (Van Assche 15). For Jan Peacock, an experienced Canadian video-maker and writer, "the look and sense of the [new video] work was...linked with the decade's 'laboratory' consciousness: the pursuit of a new language and its dialects which would connect the artist and the viewer while taking account of how such transactions are always (irrevocably) mediated" (154). Part of what made it so exciting for artists to engage these questions anew with video is that many describe their first encounters with video as marked by a certain kind of amazement, or feeling of shock, when faced with what it could do: the instantaneously viewable moving image and the easy play-back. One of the main forms of this engagement was seen in live feed-back works. Through live feed-back loops, the viewer was solicited as agent. Simultaneously, paired notions of memory and/or forgetting, seduction and/or boredom, body and/or voice, mirror and/or window, voyeur and/or victim, took on central positions on the stage of video thematics. So the sheer number of concerns and influences that video experienced made (and makes) its cultural existence uncategorisable, making its thirty-year long life without a history or language understandable. Remarkably, many of these thematics recur in contemporary work, still undermining radically the artworld's investment in the new.

Moreover, because of these originary and dynamic historical and technical ties with socio-political realities, video art and criticism constantly comes up against human bodies, broadcast television, the museum, and community struggles; and therefore, video has stakes in the shade of visibility that each of these social bodies enjoys. The two most

false. She locates this principle of (inadmissible yet unavoidable) interpenetration in Hegel, observing that "a statue can only *seem* 'self-complete and objective'", and obversely, that "there is no object of perception that does not imply a subject" (146-7). With video, then, we see a modern problem being worked upon in new ways: and my account of video art's relation with sociality covers some if this same territory. Chapter two is an expanded historical account of how this slippage becomes a productive principle in the thought of Walter Benjamin. In chapter three, I go on to say that video and literature can dialogue deconstructively with myths of interiority and individuality, in the name of collective boundary-concepts of skin, screen and surface.

important theoretical sources for the vigorous oppositional struggle that video was (and is) home to were (and are) feminism and discourses of the body. On account of these links as well, we see a recurrence in contemporary work of the central themes that video and feminism had (and have) in common: varied articulations of the uneasy but inevitable bonds between the collective and the individual, the theoretical and the practical, the self and the other, and the aesthetic and the ethical. And as in feminist practice and theory, video art and criticism is a terrain where these distinctions themselves must remain under constant scrutiny.¹⁰

Inasmuch as video has always explored its own in-betweenness, then, the more complicated picture of art and its interpretation that video has brought forward is also deeply embedded in the difficult encounter between the artworld and its engagement with the larger social field. Video critic Ruby Rich recently called on video artists to "turn their cameras back on the world" (173) as she, like many critics, sees in video the grassroots energy and cameratic verve that expresses the unstable boundaries between, and mutual displacement of, style and narrative, or aesthetics and politics. But, as urgent as it may be to commit to working on the relation between art and the world, it is as important to acknowledge that that relation is already a complicated one. For example, while video played (and plays) a role in addressing the rise of documentary concerns among minority groups in the seventies (a demand that continues today), video art takes on its ethico-aesthetic dimension as it explores the "evocative tension that ensues from the slippage

¹⁰ I don't want to construct a sense of *symmetry* between contemporary and seventies feminism, rather I wish to emphasise that feminism and video share historically diverse and often embattled strategies with which women have confronted their exclusion from fields of knowledge which supposedly accord self-knowledge and self-recognition to men. As a feminist art theorist living and writing in the 1990's, I have been thoroughly formed by the series of vehement criticisms from within feminist circles in the West of widespread racism and heterosexism, and the two ensuing decades of extensive deconstruction of the essentialisms, psychoanalytical and sociological theories, and democratic liberalisms that have grounded feminism since the inception of its so-called second wave in the early 1970's. For excellent points of entry into this series of debates, see Haraway (1989), Fuss (1989), Butler (1990), Braidotti (1991), Spivak (1993) and Grosz (1990a, 1990b).

between documented and transformed realities," in other words, it questions the very category of the documentary (Zippay 6).

What can be thematised from this brief summary is that the notion of repeating and turning back to "older histories" in order to understand un-written new ones, and old practices of resistance rejuvenated through new artforms, is fundamental to video praxis and discourse. Correspondingly, artists have used video to point to the power of the moving image to mediate old knowledge in a new way. As I mentioned above, art historical discourse has for a long time been caught in a logic of the new, which makes it difficult to admit that our ability to talk about the present or future of an artform, or indeed, to apprehend an object as a work of art at all, is deeply conditioned by the re-vival and sur-vival of practices and debates from the past. Rather than continue with this (no doubt interminable) chronological overview of the conflicted origins and destinies of video, I want to contemplate some of the broader questions at work in order to respond to this historical repetition and shifting. Where does video meet other problematics, such as how a history is written, how an image is read through its frames, and how this "reading" reflects and diffracts our social, sexual, and racial gazes, voices and silences? I am interested, in this and following chapters, in bringing forward those concerns that are relevant to contemporary video work, but my purpose in this section was to point out that most of these concerns have in fact been articulated *repeatedly* in the past three decades. My problem is thus both historical and methodological: I am wondering how one engages already available categories of interpretation to forge a burgeoning self-reflexive discourse, and how (in this case art historical) discourse is always shifted slightly each time it is appealed to and reiterated.¹¹

¹¹ I should acknowledge the debt that my work owes to Judith Butler, whose Foucauldian emphasis on the tautologies at work in many metaphysical, essentialist, and psychoanalytic accounts of culture has led her to theorise the notion of "performativity," through which cultural practices are "understood not as singular or deliberate 'acts,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (1993: 2). In light of Butler's theory, a typology of representation that does not enable a masculinist and colonizing gaze becomes more difficult to articulate, calling for a self-reflexive yet collective account of what kinds of visual/textual strategies might enact that possibility. As I will argue

Modernist legacy, shifting categories of interpretation

The reason that it is important to thematise the multifarious and indeterminate nature of video art is that the medium presents itself alongside questions of visual colonisation, and partakes of still-current discussions about the fragmentation and scopophilia that marks contemporary practice and pleasure in the increasingly globalised arena of North Atlantic society. Video is a central element in what Paul Virilio has called, the "paradoxical logic" whereby "the real-time image dominates the thing represented" and "real time subsequently prevails over real space" (1994: 63). Thankfully, Virilio stops short of extending this observation of the wide-spread fetishisation of the signifier to a nihilism that usually precedes nostalgia. He admits instead that the moving image *shifts* the terms of a debate that has, nevertheless, been with us for a long time, namely, "the problem of the objectivisation of the image." With video, this shift occurs at the level of the materiality of the image, so that "the problem of the objectivisation of the image...largely stops presenting itself in terms of some kind of paper or celluloid *support surface* - that is, in relation to a material reference space" (1994: 61). In contrast to Virilio's historical account, many scholars have resorted to alarmism about technological change, labelling video an ahistorical mode consisting of electronic signals that is but an impoverished replacement for a art work that bears an indexical relationship to the world of tangible objects.¹² But given the ubiquitous sense among both video artists and their critics that in

intermittently in the following chapters, video art often confronts us with the absence of ontological certainty, as it is particularly able to accommodate those rough edges and unclear closures of life, which are perhaps especially poignant when struggling with borderland identities marked by hybridity and disidentification. See further, Anzaldua (1987), Bhabha (1993) and Sedgwick (1993). I will deal more closely with feminism's encounter with the variegated terrain of psychoanalysis in chapter three, when I turn to feminist theories of the body as starting points in an attempt to theorise a mode of subversion of form/content and outer/inner dyads as a particular mode of touching, enacted by some recent video and literature.

¹² For a good critique of the view that video is the "ultimate postmodern referent" that does nothing more than initiate a random play of signifiers, spearheaded by Fredric Jameson, see Suderberg (1996).

videographic sensibility lies an especial force of displacement of categories of interpretation, I will side-step these various crude speculations of what video is not able to do and say.¹³

Instead, we ought to engage the paradox through which video *diverts* attempts to make up for the lack of depth that representations give us. My impression is that even while spaces of vision, logics of perception, and theories of the seductive image have proliferated with the development of communications media, video critics and artists have continued to grapple with the questions raised by modern art practices in the properly plastic media, such as essentialist formalism, minimalism, structuralism. Very broadly, we could say that video has always had a relation to the question of the abstraction of the representational surface. In other words, to the extent that video was bound on one side by broadcast television, modernism bound it on the other. As in the case with its relation to TV, this link has a contestatory yet ambivalent history, and the discussion of where video fits in with modern art practices is still fraught with a variety of perspectives.

Often, such contradictions are evident within one person's writing. Speaking about the formative decade of the seventies, Jan Peacock contends that video was always in excess of any modern aesthetic used to describe it: "Mirroring the then current concerns of performance, body art, earth and process art, [seventies] work in video took on a stark bareness, which has generally been located - but only uncomfortably and never convincingly - within minimalist aesthetics" (154). But in another passage, she claims that video's challenge to modernism lay in a properly anti-aesthetic ethic: "As part of their reaction to the slick artifice and the industrial fabrication which characterised both TV and formalist object-making...[and] since the content and the look of the work needed to reflect their sense of making something no one necessarily desired to see, aesthetic

¹³ Needless to say, Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is one of the earliest, and by now classic, conceptions of how the moving image (in his essay, the filmic image) changes the terms of art historical debate in the twentieth century.

considerations were withheld and the aesthetic experiences of the work were rudely denied as irrelevant" (155). Juxtaposing these passages, it is perhaps best to admit that video artists never had a simple, oppositional relation to modernist art practices and theories. Video artist and critic Stuart Marshall articulated this more complex interaction in a recent catalogue essay, saying that "the language of opposition and independence which was articulated by video artists found itself drawing, not only upon the anti-establishment discourse of the counter-culture that influenced agitprop videomakers, but also upon the discourse of high modernism itself" (13).

Thus, if video has from its very inception been conceived of as a powerful contestation of prevalent tendencies in art in the past three decades - television seduction and apolitical modernism - that contestation emerges as contradictory indeed. This is precisely where my discourse on video lines up with the more sensitive and subtle accounts of how we ought to think the rubric of modernity in the current artistic climate.

Sean Cubitt has made the acute observation that:

So far, modernism as a doctrinal statement on the history of art since Courbet has focused on the production of the avant-garde as a *different* mode of working in culture. The task which video has set itself is parallel to that which emerges as the new dominant years immediately after the triumph of abstract expressionism, the self-conscious looting by high art of the super-markets of culture. But where this late modernism of pop art is marked most heavily by its ironic attempts to obliterate the difference between art and culture, *video remains in the business of exploring that difference, that relationship* (1993: 35 [my emphasis]).

On the basis of this "special relationship to modernism, every pursuit of the medium's specificity uncovers a new impurity, a new relation between video and the adjacent arts" (33). Cubitt makes the claim, convincing because of the abundance of evidence available, that video, as a "rag-bag" artform (33), represents a type of "politicised modernism," a term he adopts from D.N. Rodowick.

It seems, then, that rather than striding forward toward a shining new paradigm, video art and its criticism has had to admit to the need to *reformulate* and *repoliticise* those paradoxes of loss and power in the realm of art production that have marked the struggle for social change throughout the modern period, in order to forge unthought-of versions of what constitutes political approaches in art. On this view, seemingly disparate aspects of video embody the contradictory state of affairs where modernity has always been contemplating with awe and a certain feeling of disgust its own estrangement from reality, the illusory nature of its image, in short, its own historical framing. Applying video politically in this way, then, means to perform deliberately, and for everyone to perceive, the double gesture, which both contravenes and rehearses the separation of viewer and viewed, form and content, and so forth.

To summarise my position then, let me say that the presence of so many limit-concepts in the writing on video provides an occasion to intervene into processes of concept-formation, or the way that interpretation is approached and made. In short, my belief that video art demands, like any discursive production, to be seen and judged, means that my focus on video opens up the whole terrain of art history and interpretation,¹⁴ for instance, an examination of what we mean by form versus content. Rather than ask whether video is art, a notion that comes up repeatedly in video criticism is that video continues to question the very boundaries of what constitutes art.¹⁵ And the

¹⁴ Indeed, my operative conception of "history" is meant to render the very distinction between interpretation and history suspect. In this sense, history, and a historical method in the way I am using it lies close to Foucault's notion of genealogy. For Foucault, "the development of humanity is a series of interpretations. The role of genealogy is to record its history: the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts...as they stand for the emergence of different interpretations, they must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process" (1984: 86). Foucault aligns genealogy with "effective history," and means to emphasise that history is above all "a differential knowledge," a knowledge that is made for "cutting," not "understanding" (88). The ultimate goal of this genealogy that I shall call history, is profoundly *ethical*: namely to strive to be exposed in one's time and place as a historian, and "to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion" (81). I will deal more closely with this very Benjaminian ethical posture toward otherness and its relation to art history in the second chapter.

¹⁵ Video is not unique in this function among contemporary forms of visual or literary arts. Instead, what marks contemporary interventions is a fluidity or oscillation between modes of representation, something which the following two chapters try to fore-ground. In doing this, my thesis aims to insist on the ethical

further we understand the questioning of rigid meaning-production as emblematic of video art, the more we can locate within that discourse a number of possibilities of the very function or definition of art.

Medium, frame, politics of (de)formation

More specifically, the boundary-discourse so present in the realm of video is often phrased in terms of a catachresis at the level of the relation of form to content. So, in the same essay I cited above, Jody Berland goes on to say that the "sense of incompleteness" she and others locate in video renders distinctions between "technical form and (artistic) function obsolete;" indeed, "the paradox of a language that is not-yet-a-language posits a site...in which 'form' and 'function' totally redefine one another through their embrace" (12). In the catalogue for *Signs of the Times*, a 1993 British video retrospective, curator Chrissie Isles points out that in order to thwart the project of "writing a general history of video," the show is instead concerned with "an examination of the interface between medium and meaning" (11). Thematising an area of conflict and fluctuation, the rest of the essays in the catalogue treat the problem confronted repeatedly by video artists: how to "use illusion only as a means to see itself"? (Hall 29). Just as critics have difficulties pinning down influences from oppositional practices on the one hand, and modernism on the other, there are different ways to conceive of the history of form in video.¹⁶ One artist in the catalogue writes about the care for context as a kind of multiplication of elements, saying about his installation practice that "the immediate perception of a single video

significance of trying to be cognisant of, and specific about, the paradigm changes occurring in our contemporary moment.

¹⁶ I must issue a caveat from the start: so as not to become enslaved to a modernist search for the uniqueness of the video artform, note that by "form" I mean all material, including contextual, characteristics that accrete in various video practices: the TV set(s), the soundtrack, textures or odors, architectural or sculptural elements or projections, and the scale, format, positions and interrelationships of any of these. Also, in terms of the screen-content, I will define formal strategies as ones that draw attention to these aforementioned characteristics via contrasts, signals, electrifications, luminosities, montages, repetitions or distortions of various kinds.

monitor screen is as a kind of window [unavoidably a television window]. At the moment of attention the viewer assumes a total disregard for the TV as object. But the introduction of a second monitor [or more] into the visual field presents a monumental problem....As one is seen as a window, the other becomes object" (Hall 30). In another example of this kind of use of the medium, video artist Tamara Krikorian "insisted upon recording the medium's intervention in the process of representation," by "exploiting the camera's inherent tendency to overdrive which causes enormous contrast fluctuations across the video image when brightly lit areas appear within the frame" (Marshall 13).

Sean Cubitt continues his characterisation of video's version of "politicised modernism" by claiming that there is an important shift from the material interventions made by the Duchampian readymade and those made by electronic media. For video does not simply rest at an anti-aesthetic logic. Indeed, if Duchamp's work "foregrounds the media used...and insists on the temporal and processual nature of the phenomena investigated" (47), video comes closer to an aesthetic that allows the expansion of the boundaries of what art can say and do remain in process, yet able to make *more* than an ironical gesture toward socio-political experiences. What is perhaps the most characteristic of this use of form in video is to stage an insistent change at the level of framing, to create a sense of deferral of biographical /autobiographical details, but not to the exclusion of uses of fragmented narrative elements, or the figure, with its physiognomic markers. This model of formal intervention entails rehearsing the scene where sexual, racial, disease, and age differences are captured, and either identified or rendered invisible. So, instead of being used to establish either an anti-aesthetic, or an absolute, universal, pure aesthetic, form in video is used to delay a resolution of an image into recognisable parts.

Influenced by French theorists of the moving image such as Gilles Deleuze and Alain Landau, video theorist Christine Ross has argued along the same lines that "there is a 'double scene' created by the video image - a kind of 'image break' produced by the lack

of coherence between electronic matter and the icon: the video image defines itself through its *activity*, its continuous formation and deformation" (1988: 122). In a later work Ross has alluded to the notion of an "aesthetics of discrepancy" (1995: 129) to connote strategies in video-making that carry strong ties to the ethico-political agenda of resisting dominant mediatic forms of video representation, complicating normally understandable and clearly named experiences, like remembering, seeing, speaking and touching, in order to mark them as indeterminate. Reading Vern Hume's *Lamented Moments/Desired Objects*, Ross says that the tape "practices the discrepancy in such a way as to connect the *je-de-surface* with the *monde-de-surface* that surrounds it, relaying memory, what was formerly called depth of time, in terms of reminiscence, instability, transience - indeed, forgetting" (1995: 133).¹⁷

This kind of image discrepancy is similarly thematised in Mona Hatoum's *Changing Parts* (1984), produced at the Western Front (Vancouver). The tape begins with a slow sequence of overlapping black and white photo-stills of various parts of a sterile and empty bathroom: the porcelain shelf, the lock and window on the door, the taps, the plumbing under the sink, and the geometric pattern of floor tiles. The starkness and serenity of the sequence is underscored by the audial component, one of Bach's solo cello suites. The sequence of stills is gradually interrupted by more and more frequent lapses into distorted electronic blur and loud noise. Finally, the noise displaces the music

¹⁷ In chapter two, I will briefly come back to Mark Cheetham's reading of the same work in the context of memory.

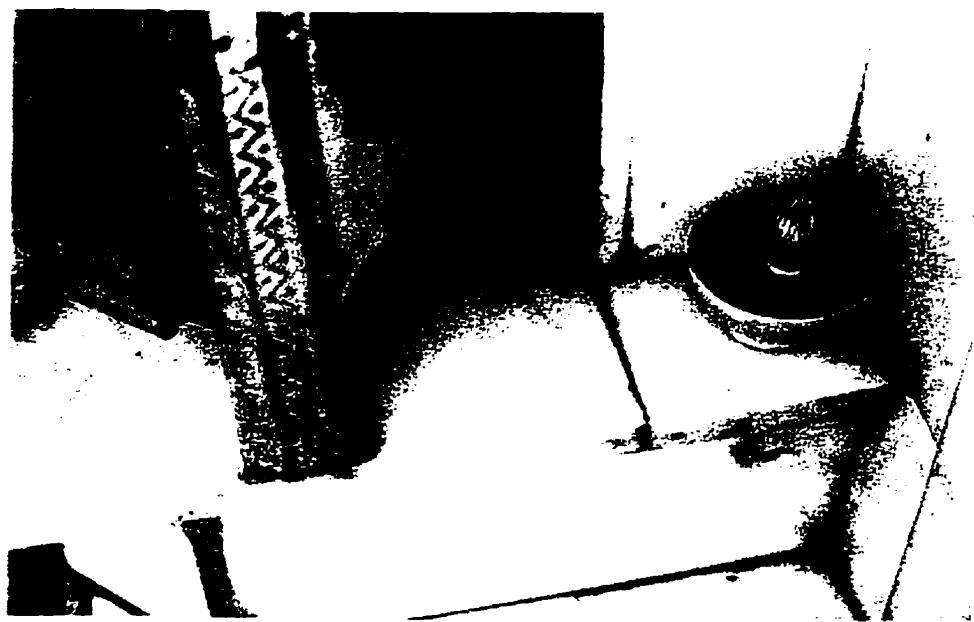


FIGURE 1 **Mona Hatoum, *Changing Parts* (video still), 1984, videotape, b&w, 24:00 minutes.** Courtesy of V Tape, Toronto.



FIGURE 2 Mona Hatoum, *Changing Parts* (video still), 1984, videotape, b&w, 24:00 minutes. Courtesy of V Tape, Toronto.

altogether and a slow-motion video of a woman (Hatoum) moving replaces the stills, affecting changes on numerous levels in the piece. The shift from a photographic to a videographic sensibility brings with it a different level of resolution: the slow motion video

image is grainy, made up of a range of greys, and lacking in clear lines demarcating the forms. The marked change in image rendering makes me aware of the low resolution of the video medium: it makes me experience more acutely how much the video is necessarily a mediation, not a mirroring of the woman's body. I cannot immediately resolve my look, and perceive the screen as a series of fields of grey.

The difference between Hatoum's body and the space surrounding her is difficult to distinguish, for a screen (a plastic shower cubicle) separates me from the confined space of her actions.¹⁸ Within "her" space, Hatoum makes a series of repeated gestures, caressing, scratching and biting the screen, drawing attention to the plastic screen that is screening her off from a resolved view. I am therefore separated from Hatoum's body by two screens: the screen that allows me to see her, or that allows her to re-represent herself to me (the video screen itself); and the screen that disallows me from resolving that seeing, and allows her to isolate/protect herself from me (the cubicle). Here, there is an important complication of the way that the screen functions. As a framing element it provides the means to illuminate a past event, that is, it makes the event, the body and its gestures, a visual syntax, intelligible in and through the reproduction of images. But simultaneously, it functions as a sort of "filter" of images: screening in/out some possibilities of what may be perceived. So the screen becomes twofold in the videographic event, opacifying a signifying process that normally appears transparent. The soundtrack contributes to this feel, with its intense, disordered blur. Hatoum's explicit doubled usage of the screen becomes even more clear, as the camera focuses on

¹⁸ This section of the video is in fact a record of a public performance by the artist called *Under Siege* (1982), which has been spliced together with photo stills from her parents bathroom in Beirut.

Hatoum's hands, gesturing and smearing what looks like blood (liquid mud) on the screen which separates me from her. Here, Hatoum creates a very tactile membrane, which allows her, as artist-object, viscerally and visually to draw attention to the screen.

On my reading, then, Hatoum fore-grounds through specific strategies video's ability to represent the doubling of representation. I try to join her in the effort to resist the general art historical impulse by which the subject's gaze, or desire, is imagined simply to fall upon its object, in which case, theory will remain always on the beholder's side of our accounts, and the object will count at best only in its resistance to theory.¹⁹ I am not only concerned with rearticulating the relation between form and content in an already formed sphere called "art history"- or even between aesthetics and art. More profoundly, my effort to theorise video is, as video criticism has been from the very first, about questioning the very discreteness and self-containment of those terms.

¹⁹ The feminist work done in film theory since the late seventies to historicise the gaze represents one of the most powerful refutations of this hypothesis. Feminists have insisted on approaching the object as itself necessarily implicated in the gaze/desire that binds the subject to the object. See particularly Mulvey (1979), Rose (1986), de Lauretis (1987), Doane (1990), and Silverman (1995). It may be remarked that the syntactical positions that are associated with subject and object (exemplified by the sentence "I see it") generally hinder the kind of re-articulation that I am speaking of here. What this also points to is that there is an important way in which grammar *always* fails us, as it enables us. Acknowledging such lapses in language is also a key notion in my approach to re-reading art history. In general, my project takes seriously the crisis in philosophy that has marked the thought of post-structuralists since the late 1960's, which makes it impossible to speak of an "aesthetics" that is distinct from and concerned with different questions than "art" or "art history." The discursive crisis or impasse of representation that I am working with here may implicate any symbolic economy, pictorial or linguistic. I begin with the assertion that, as they have historically developed in the West, it is as impossible to presuppose that textual and visual representation are separable as it is to simply claim that they are equatable. Nevertheless, in the following two chapters, I will pass over this territory again, so as to establish, as did Benjamin in his rejected doctoral dissertation that would become *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, a strong analogy between visual and textual work. This does not mean that, (as many art historians, reacting to a crude version of deconstruction, have wrongly asserted) the view I am adopting forecloses on considering the unique and historical difference between visuality and textuality, nor that I am working with a model where discursive practices totalise the social field. On the contrary, my stance is meant to counter structuralist dogma by examining where and how visual, textual, bodily, and communitarian experience touch, entwine, and move apart, hopefully to be altered irrevocably in the process.

Situating Hegel, re-placing art history

In the way that I have read video, in general, and Hatoum's work, in particular, the medium can be seen to take over a critical function that has usually been considered part of a philosophical aesthetics. When conceived of in this way, video creates a meeting between a philosophy of history and the cultural call to foster social change. The practice of video can thus be conceived of as a radical historical democratic struggle for the right to create meaning. Hegel's *Aesthetics* is an important point of entry onto the topography of relations between material, social and political dimensions of art, because in its historical reception, this work has the paradoxical structure of a threshold/cornerstone for art history.²⁰ Without pretending to be able to "take account" of the wide range of positions through which Hegel positions himself vis-à-vis art, I will summarise his characterisations of the symbolic, classical and romantic art forms, as well as some of the complex twists through which they supplant each other. At the end of this chapter, I will come back to how video, Hatoum's in particular, takes up a contestatory place with regard to the metaphysical categories of form and content, and how this relates to my theoretical stance toward Hegel.

The central idea guiding Hegel's philosophy is that "what from the beginning is and remains *only* affirmative is and remains without life." Further, "life proceeds to negation and its grief, and it only becomes affirmative in its own eyes by obliterating the opposition and the contradiction."²¹ Broadly speaking, Hegel posits a *telos* where the possibility of examining the relationship of contemporary art with philosophy (in crisis) is foreclosed through a totalisation of philosophy and a sublation of art. Thus his work would presumably subsume and render obsolete the present project, since his postulation

²⁰ As such, the *Aesthetics* have been used intermittently as a powerful legitimating force (Gombrich (1984)), and, conversely, as an ultimate example of an absolutist and idealist aesthetics, to be combated with "materialist" art and aesthetics (Crimp (1986)).

²¹ Hegel (1975), Vol. I, 23. Hereafter called AI.

of the end of art in fact places art and its theory in the strictly non-dialectical category of irrelevant historical fact. However, it should be remarked that the *Aesthetics* contains more than a thousand pages detailing the *non-reconciliation* of meaning, content and Idea with its contradiction, body, expression, form and concretisation. Why does Hegel's historical architectonics endlessly thematise negation as a precursor to harmony, and yet ultimately posit a sublation (a more complex form of negation) of form that remains in process?

Hegel treats the entire production, perception and reception of works of art as a process that should be analysed in terms of how art *mediates* the relation between form and content:²² "the task of art must therefore be firmly established in art's having a calling to display the appearance of life, and especially of spiritual animation...and to make the external correspond with its Concept" (AI 152). In general, Hegel thus offers a critique of, on the one hand, the pure transcendence of matter, and on the other hand, the idea of a true representation. In terms of intervening into the status quo of philosophical history, Hegel's emphasis on mediation makes the Cartesian view that representations simply mirror reality a circumvention of, rather than a solution to, the central problem accompanying all forms of cultural representation.

There are a number of risks associated with staging a theoretical "return" to Hegel's *Aesthetics*. Texts are sites of an inevitable process of resignification, and the resistance to true representation that my contemporary reading of Hegel may locate, creates a false sense of a line between my work and his; a line that is actually not a line, but as historically and culturally topographical and arbitrary as any other discursive relationship. In general, rather than read Hegel's *Aesthetics* as "symptomatic" of the need constantly to authorise the fiction of totalising history and the ultimate disappearance of artforms, I want to look for the moments in which the *Aesthetics* actually fails to re-

²² Also connoted by the following dyads: sensory and Idea, appearance and Concept, substance and spirit, and external and internal.

capitulate the fiction of a monolithic and accessible "history" of any kind. Likewise, it is important to problematise the assumption that Hegel's *Aesthetics* posits an aesthetic experience that relies on a self-knowing and self-present subject, as it is wrong to conflate the Hegelian subject with the Cartesian *cogito*. Furthermore, Hegel wrote the *Aesthetics* partly in an effort to historicise and critique Kant's autonomous subject. For it is the recognition that content and meaning "are so penetrated by one another that the external, the particular, appears exclusively as a presentation of the inner" (AI 95) that impels Hegel further to theorise the complexity of the changing historical interaction between humans and their inanimate surroundings.

In fact, what interests me about the trajectory of the relation between abstraction and embodiment, or content and form offered in the *Aesthetics*, is precisely that it problematises the category of idealistic consciousness. It became apparent in my attempt to indicate video's various political modulations that when we think, write, and represent, our access to a ethico-political reality is a problem, which, as such, itself needs to be thoroughly theorised. We could say, then, that the "abstraction" that Hegel's dialectics is often accused of perpetrating is to a certain extent unavoidable. Indeed, the very call for a concrete theory of art retains and relies on a paradox. The accusation of unmitigated "idealism" seems particularly false in relation to the *Aesthetics*, for in fact Hegel constantly tries to come up with a way of thinking the very difference between the external and internal. And this is where Hegel joins up with my position on video, for the latter also resists the resolution of the gaze into a one-directional, linear movement from subject to object.

While there is no doubt that Hegel struggles to find a way to articulate the determinist harmonisation of the two poles of the dichotomies that condition self-alienation, this process is nevertheless continuous and dynamic. This is not meant to reinscribe the Hegelian teleological necessity, but rather, to admit, as does Derrida, that

Teleology does not always have the appeasing character one wants to give it. It can be questioned, denounced as a lure or an effect, but its threat cannot be reduced. With the telos can also be found the cliff (*l'a-pic*). Where one can get a foothold or fall (to the tomb). In positing the teleological necessity *in effect* we are already in(to) Hegel. He did nothing but powerfully unfold the consequence of this proposition (1986: 22).

In short, the dialectical form presents a trap. How are we to understand the nature of this formal trap today? Is it on the insistence on the form (dialectics) that the content (an onto-teleological story founded on the presupposition of a free, male Western subject) is obfuscated? Or could we also say that what is veiled in the text is the dialectical form as *an effect* of the privileging of content? In my re-consideration of Hegel's *Aesthetics* in writing (about) video, I will clearly need to take the coextension of these possibilities as a clue to viewing the *Aesthetics* itself as a terrain of displacement.²³

Lying somewhere between issuing the cultural demand for symbolic intelligibility and thwarting or re-writing that demand, the articulation of an art and critical practice that is able to respond to changing social and political circumstances depends upon the continued engagement with seminal texts from the past, such as Hegel's *Aesthetics*. I

²³ My interest here does not lie in mapping the Platonic privileging of content over form in Western metaphysics, which is clearly too large of a discussion for this project. However, I understand Hegel's *Aesthetics* to be deeply implicated in, and symptomatic of, the agonistic voyage of the sign, and its materiality and symbolism, throughout modernity. As an epistemic mode, art history has more and more been forced to confront that in its own founding moments, it was appealing to philosophical thinkers, most notably Hegel and Kant. For the purposes of being able to respond to contemporary art, and more specifically, video art, I believe that my analysis is already predicated upon a transmission and assimilation of what we may broadly think of as philosophical categories. Furthermore, even though many formalist artists and critics radically privileged art's material, or formal aspects, the "anti-figuration" posture is, in my view, itself caught up in a dialectical schema by virtue of its operative definition of form and content. I do not have any intention of historiographically examining these moments of appeal or rejection in the last two centuries; although that is doubtless a worthwhile project. Rather, I aim to examine the fact that Hegel's aesthetic theory posits an art that forever balances on the edge of dialectical movement, and use this to advantage in video criticism. In the second chapter, I go on to say that this reading of Hegel points him in the direction of Benjamin, who tried, much as I am doing, to overcome the absolutism and historicism of Hegelian dialectics. Benjamin, responding to his immediate social circumstances, drew out a line of thinking that would be able to take account of, and respond to the fact that "mankind's self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order." I do not believe that enough ground has been broken in Western society in the discussion of aesthetic versus political strategies of art-making and criticism since Benjamin's characterisation of mid-1930's Europe; and for that reason I am still, in some way, caught in its logic.

make this assertion in the knowledge that its effects on the interpretation and making of art have been both diverse and diffuse. I agree with Thierry de Duve, who has located Hegel's philosophy of art as central in the very idea of "art's double bind" as we have seen video artists and critics experiencing it:

The period of history that invented History could not fail to conceive of itself as moved forward by the project of its own accomplishment and self-negation. The negativity of the avant-garde, for which tradition meant betrayal, is explained by the anticipated retrospection of the verdict thanks to which avant-garde would, in the end, be incorporated into tradition precisely for having first betrayed it.... So modernity seems to be constituted by a forever unending process of ending....If, since Mallarmé, the ideology of the avant-garde has been massively Hegelian, this is because the end of modernity, the end of the idea of art as a proper name, its completion through incompleteness, has been the program ever since Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik* (76-7).

So, theorists have located Hegel's philosophy of aesthetics at or as the threshold of modernity; indeed, the whole dialectical system can be seen as having been always already caught up in its own ending. Now, what I would add to this description in order to focus my intervention into Hegel, is that what is so enigmatic about modernity - and the concept of history it seems to usher in - is precisely that it strives to divide radically form and content. In a close reading of principal sections of the influential aesthetic theories of Hegel, I try to articulate the significance of deferral and narrative failure or splitting in the *Aesthetics*. What is interesting about interrogating this text *with* video art is that, in both, basic attempts to resolve interpretation into a series of hermeneutic binaries fails dramatically. Even though the triadic structure of Hegel's' dialectical structure predetermines the fate of art, as does any teleological schema logically speaking, the intelligibility of this schema is itself conditioned by the congruity of the dyadic pairs. In other words, the two parts of these pairs must be apparently of the same order. The heuristic and epistemological value of the categories of form and content are precisely placed under suspicion by the poetic deconstructive practice we have termed an

"aesthetics of discrepancy." Thus, Hegel's *Aesthetics*, presumed by his critics to embody the "coherent, linear" historicism and "narrative principle...of an aestheticised, totalised past" can be seen to undermine its own ontological position through a loss of figurative coherence (Steinberg 91). I enact this mode by pulling at the main thread in the *Aesthetics*, namely the narrative of style.

Although Hegel's account of the development of style is teleological and totalising, the integration of the two terms of the internal/content versus external/form is constantly happening through art, and yet, constantly surpassing and negating itself as an impossible situation. Our engagement with art is to constantly re-experience that almost-becoming. Of course, this impossibility of fulfilment is the reason that Hegel predicts the end of art. Therefore, Derrida has argued that

Hegelianism...makes clear [that] the positive infinite must be thought through (which is possible only if it thinks itself) in order that the indefiniteness of *differance* appear *as such*. But this appearing of the Ideal as an infinite *differance* can only be produced within a relationship with death in general (1973: 101-2).

It would make sense, then, to ask what kind of work the figure of art's death does for Hegel's argument. The problem of the Hegelian "death of art" is another logical thread that presents a conceptual knot, about which Paul de Man has said that

we can...assert that the two statements "art if for us a thing of the past" and "the beautiful is the sensory manifestation of the idea" are in fact one and the same. Art is "of the past" in the radical sense, in that...it leaves the interiorisation of experience forever behind. It is of the past to the extent that it radically inscribes, and thus forever forgets, its ideal content. The reconciliation of the two main theses of the *Aesthetics* occurs at the expense of the aesthetic as a stable category (1982: 773-4).

So on the one hand, a re-examination of Hegel's aesthetic theory should serve to historicise the dilemma of representing the other in art. Because the fact that art finally fails to negotiate the sensory/thought divide successfully reflects on the usage of such

words as "genuine," "self-consciousness" and "truth." Quite simply, this means that, as Judith Butler has remarked, "Hegel's subject can no longer be entertained...apart from the thesis of its very impossibility" (1987: 231). A consideration of Hegel's work on aesthetics must always be wary of appealing to a naive intentionality, for, as Rajan has observed, while Hegel does "advance the study of artistic modes as modes of consciousness...these modes radically complicate the very concept of 'consciousness,' for what they express is its non-identity" (1995: 29). On the other hand, I, of course, need to situate Hegel's theorisation within a largely questionable colonial and patriarchal discourse, where the very representation of the other is produced as both a threat and a condition of its philosophical cohesion. Hence, I will also examine the disjunctive aspects of the relation between the Hegelian mode of slow displacement, and a videographic "aesthetics of discrepancy," as enabled by Hatoum (*Changing Parts*, 1984) in the final section.

The journey of form and content: (non)sublation of form

Symbolic art *seeks* that perfect unity of inner meaning and external shape which classical art *finds* in the presentation of substantial individuality to sensuous contemplation, and which romantic art *transcends* in its superior spirituality.

Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*

A brief contemporary critique of the *Aesthetics* can be found in Rebecca Comay's "Facing History/ Memories of Resistance. Boltanski, Benjamin, and the Aura of Fascist Architecture," where Hegel is characterised as contributing to an aesthetic tradition that partakes in the phantasm of idealised consciousness, whereby the artwork, as Other, conditions - through being anthropomorphised - the possibility of a "philosophico-theological ideal of identity as the redemption of the dead or missing Other" (35).²⁴

²⁴ On this view, Hegel is no different from the various art historical interpretations of him. The work of Heinrich Wölfflin, for example, based on a complex re-working of both Hegelian and Kantian aesthetics.

Hegel's view of the classical artwork is described by Comay as the apex of the triad created by the classical, symbolic and romantic forms of art: "for Hegel the genuine artwork is always effectively marked as classical" (AI 34). However, although it is correct that the classical art form is described as "genuine," the "highest phase" (AI 96) of art is for Hegel the romantic form, not the classical, because it embodies a "free whole which does not appear to be determined from without."²⁵ While it is true for Hegel that with classical poetry "we find...a world hovering beautifully between the universal foundations of life" (AII 1098), this statement is undermined by its relation to his view that the romantic form of poetry "is the art which can exhaust all the depths of the spirit's whole wealth" (AII 998). In these examples, it is clear that Hegel's valorisation of the classical mode is equivocal, at best, revealing the entropy within the dialectic. However, Hegel tries to circumscribe this slippage using the figure of the innate obsolescence of art, by saying that if the classical artform "is in any way defective, the defect is in art as a whole, i.e. in the limitation of its sphere" (AI 85). But instead, the splitting of the arts into different modes, as well as the positioning of philosophy in a different order, guarantees the impossibility of what Hegel wants to secure, the perfectibility of identity and the end of dialectical movement. For example, Hegel ends his third introductory lecture by claiming that "art has the vocation of revealing *the truth* in the form of sensuous artistic shape, of representing the reconciled antithesis just described, and, therefore, has the purpose in itself, in this representation and revelation" (AI 61). But in

inscribes the opposition of the external and internal aspects of an artwork as distinct historical periods (Holly 1984). This schema provides a basis for an art historical theory of cyclical development where one peak appears in the clarity and rationality of the art of antiquity, which recurs in a second culmination in High Renaissance painting. In Wölfflin, Hegelian ambiguity is thus forcibly resolved as a totalising embrace of the classical, a scheme within which, according to Iversen, "postclassical styles can only be regarded as lacking coherence" (1993: 67). This results in a theory, "an analytic vocabulary, propped up on what seems to be the discovery and isolation of the proper object of a history of vision" (Melville 1990: 9). Keith Moxey has argued that, similarly to Wölfflin, Jacob Burckhardt, one of the earliest historians to use Hegel, makes operative "the Hegelian form/content distinction that empowers the history of art to become a history of style" (1996: 9). What I am arguing is that it is possible, even necessary to reread Hegel differently for art history.

²⁵ Hegel (1975), Vol. II, 999. Hereafter called AII.

the remarks that conclude the Introduction, Hegel states that, quite on the contrary, philosophy embodies the truth-ideal of beauty, because "in its highest phase art ends by transcending itself, inasmuch as it abandons the medium of a harmonious embodiment of mind in the sensuous form, and passes from the poetry of imagination into the prose of thought" (AI 96).²⁶

Hence, these artistic modes (fail to) propel the spirit's attempt to achieve identity with itself not only through, but *as*, the very forms in which it objectifies itself. The division of these prepositions (through and as) signals the dilemma that many art theorists have encountered repeatedly up to the contemporary moment when trying to understand art's framing by social and material conditions, in terms of relations with the spectator and with circulating political and aesthetic discourses.²⁷ This debate can be focused in the usage of the form and content distinction. The same problem, as I have shown, rallies and organises the study and making of video art. Next, I want to set up this dilemma, without trying to resolve it, in terms of Derrida's analysis of Hegel's theory of art,²⁸ which emphasises that the dialectic in the *Aesthetics* is, in general, analogous to a theory of signs whose metaphorical structure is provided by the circle, a structure that deconstructs in the following manner:

The mind must put itself into its own product, produce a discourse on what its produces, introduce itself of itself into itself.... We are, right from

²⁶ It is quite extraordinary how indeterminate Hegel's claim to truth is, but importantly, these moments of rhetorical ambiguity are also what allow the dialectic to work. For example, the dialectic movement in the *Aesthetics* is described in the following way: "However far, in the Ideal, spirit's determinacy and its external appearance appears simply resumed into itself, still there is at the same time immediately bound up with spirit's particularisation, turned out from within into external existence, the principle of development, and therefore, this relation to externality, the difference and struggle of oppositions" (AI 177).

²⁷ In the second chapter, I will approach this central problem of interpretive practice in my readings of seminal texts by Walter Benjamin.

²⁸ Stephen Melville has written that deconstruction has entered the terrain of art history in one of three ways, either because of a "perceived appropriateness to the effect of work frequently described as postmodern;" or as "part of broader efforts to bring literary theory to bear upon the consideration of visual objects;" or in order to "intervene...in the reading of the texts of art history itself" (1990: 5). Even though Melville acknowledges that these concerns are bound to be "interconnected," one might add that these concerns are not separable in the first place. We can see video discourse as particularly potent terrain for questioning that separation, given its engagement with its own intertextual ties.

the introduction, encircled. The mind is what it is, says what it means, only by *returning*. But art forms only one of the circles in the great circle of the *Geist* or the revenant...The end of art, and its truth, will have been philosophy, and so on...The fact remains that art is studied from the point of view of its end. Its pastness is its end. Its pastness is its truth. The philosophy of art is thus a circle in a circle of circles: a "ring" says Hegel, in the totality of philosophy. It turns upon itself and in annulling itself it links onto other rings...the inscription of a circle in the circle does not necessarily give the abyss, onto the abyss, *en abyme*. In order to be abyssal, the smallest circle must inscribe in itself the figure of the largest. *Is there any abyss in the Hegelian circulation?* (1995: 26-27).

In response to his own rhetorical question, Derrida makes the observation that "to the question posed in this form there is no decidable answer... I note only this: the answer arrests the abyss, unless it be already dragged down into it in advance" (27). An explanation of this last statement can be found two pages prior to this discussion, where, in answer to the same question ("How could a circle place itself *en abyme*?") Derrida holds that if Hegel's

discourse on the circle also had to *describe* a circle, and perhaps the very one that it describes, describe a circular movement at the very moment that it describes a circular movement, describe it displacing itself in its meaning [*sens*], or else as if a discourse on the abyss had to know the abyss, in the sense that one knows something that happens to or affects one, as in 'to know failure' or 'to know success' rather than to know an object. The circle and the abyss, then, the circle *en abyme* (24).

The problem Derrida identifies here is enunciative or performative in nature. I have been trying to argue that a project such as Hegel's can be written so that the self-reflexivity of the Spirit reads as a destabilisation by the self-reflexivity of the writer; which, in turn, questions the overall structure through which the argument is stabilised in the first place, exposing the Spirit "describing itself displacing itself" (24).²⁹

²⁹ Derrida shows how Hegel's aesthetic circle places itself under erasure in several other ways as well. For instance, Derrida remarks that the true "representation of a naive consciousness" is problematised by Hegel's admission that "there is no absolute beginning in science," or in Derrida's words, "on a circle of circles, one is justified in starting from any point" (1987: 28).

However, it would be dangerous to underestimate the difference between Hegel's use of the word *difference* and *differance*. For in Hegel's line of thought, the functioning of the dialectic, as the following passage illustrates, *relies* on that difference, and on the veiled privileging of one of the terms. In appealing to onto-theological presuppositions, Hegel can thus create the metaphysical hierarchy and the conditions for the subsequent *Aufhebung*:

For greatness and force are truly measured only by the greatness and force of the opposition out of which the spirit brings itself back to unity with itself again. The intensity and depth of subjectivity come all the more to light, the more endlessly and tremendously it is divided against itself, and the more lacerating are the contradictions in which it still has to remain firm in itself. In this development alone is preserved the might of the Idea and the Ideal, for might consists only in maintaining oneself within the negative of oneself (AI 178).

But again, a more complicated picture emerges upon closer reading. Although there is a tendency to label Hegel as a binary thinker, Hegel's treatment of difference does not exactly privilege either of the terms of a binary. Instead, the dialectic relies on a figure that requires more than a movement from A to B. For example, he says that even though "these opposite requirements may be put in this way: the material should be handled either objectively, appropriately to its content and its period, or subjectively, i.e. assimilated entirely to the custom and culture of the present. To cling to either of these in their opposition leads to an equally false extreme" (AI 265). Early in his career, Derrida noted the way that one ought to think of Hegel's legacy when trying to emphasise the contingency of philosophical foundations:

Despite the very profound affinities that *differance* thus written has with Hegelian speech (as it should be read), it can, at a certain point, not exactly break with it, but rather work a sort of displacement with regard to it. A definite rupture with Hegelian language would make no sense, nor would it be at all likely; but this displacement is both infinitesimal and radical (1973: 145).

More specifically, the following examples taken together reveal the ambiguity to which Hegelian argumentation is given. First, observe this characterisation of classical art:

[In the classical form] art has reached its own essential nature by bringing the Idea, as spiritual individuality, directly into harmony with its bodily reality in such a perfect way that external existence now for the first time no longer preserves any independence in contrast with the meaning which it is to express, while conversely the inner [meaning], in its shape worked out for our vision shows there only itself and in it is related to itself affirmatively (AI 301).

Again, one would assume that this explication completes the unproblematised and fundamentally nostalgic valorisation of a classical artistic mode, proceeding along the same lines of legitimisation as traditional art historians dating from the Renaissance to the present, and through which Renaissance art, as a rejuvenation of the art of antiquity, is repeatedly installed as the culmination of the entire history of Western visual art.³⁰ However, the subsequent passage shows how, for Hegel, the classical unified circle (in the first passage) is both the apex and the lapse in the dialectic of the aesthetic problem:

But...when the Idea of the beautiful is comprehended as absolute spirit, and therefore as the spirit which is free in its own eyes, it is no longer completely realised in the external world, since its true determinate being it has only itself in itself as spirit. It therefore dissolves that classical unification of inwardness and external manifestation and takes flight out of externality back into itself. This provides the fundamental typification of the *romantic* art-form (AI 302).

This is indeed a tortured scheme, in which the trope of the circle becomes a circle within circles, or spiral, through which linear geometric logic is *mise en abyme*. Rajan has called this image the "concave dialectic" (34). Clearly, it is of limited use to describe the displacement of spatial mapping in spatial terms, but here we are perhaps dealing with a

³⁰ See Vasari (1965), Winckelmann (1987), Wölfflin (1950), Panofsky (1970).

certain register of metaphor where the limits of logocentrism become the most apparent.

In a similar juxtaposition, Hegel asserts, on the one hand, that

even in its gods the Greek people has brought its spirit into its conscious perception, vision, and representation, and has given them by art and existent embodiment which is perfectly adequate to the true content. On account of this correspondence...art in Greece has become the supreme expression of the Absolute...while the later romantic art, although it is art, yet points already to a higher form of consciousness than art can provide (AI 438).

Paradoxically, this "supreme expression of the Absolute" (classical art) is on the preceding page described by Hegel as failing to "pass beyond the pure ground of the genuine ideal." In other words, "the opposition, grounded in the Absolute, classical art has not probed to its depths and reconciled." (AI 436)

While we do need to escape the *telos* of Hegel's thought in the *Aesthetics*, its determinism and xenophobia, we must not assume that negation refers either to identity or nothingness. Indeed, if Hegelian negation is the condition of identity, insofar as it is conceived of as an endless movement, it brings into play the trope of the spiral. In order to be able to stretch the very limits of what is deemed intelligible, we should see this metaphoric distortion as productive, for there is constant slippage between the terms of a dual system of thought, as my analysis of Hegel's *Aesthetics* has underscored. The loss of symbolic coherence in the spiralling dialectic alludes to those moments when sensory experience is *in excess* of any language used to express it. Because this allusion itself takes place within language, the limits to what it can revolutionise are shown to be continuously displaced. This structure of excess is akin to the not-yet-language of video as a re-deployment of TV technology.

Changing Parts: screening (out) content/ (de)forming the gaze

Perhaps the most obvious criticism of a transcultural metanarrative such as Hegel's *Aesthetics* is the degree to which Hegel relies on the structural under-privileging of "Eastern" forms of art, re-creating in temporal and geographical form the pattern of hierarchical stratification of aesthetic merit Keith Moxey has called "a historiographic hydraulics" (1996: 3).³¹ Hence, in order to issue the claim that "only in the highest art are the Idea and presentation truly in conformity with one another" (AI 80) Hegel offers an instantiation of how that conformity is compromised in the artistic images of "the Chinese, the Indians, and Egyptians," because they "never get beyond formlessness or a bad or untrue definiteness of form" (AI 75). By an inverted and veiled logic, the counter-example, the indeterminate, binds the determinate, but remains excluded except as a negation, placed in the ultimately underprivileged style category of the symbolic form of art. There is no doubt that Hegel's orientalism is foundational to his method, and I agree with Anne McClintock that as a result of Hegel, and the colonial tradition he subtended, "the stubborn and threatening heterogeneity of the colonies was contained and disciplined not as socially or geographically different from Europe and thus equally valid, but as temporally different and thus irrevocably superannuated by history" (40).³²

However, as is often the case with Hegel's narrative in general, his argument seems to turn on the impossibility of causality, on the textual level. Taking place at the level of representation, then, the displacement of Hegel via a deconstructive reading practice threatens the image-structure set up by early photographers like William Henry

³¹ For a discussion of how Hegelian "hydraulics" works in terms of gender privilege as well, see Irigaray, "The Eternal Irony of the Community" (1985: 214-26); also, Chanter (1995), Diprose (1991), Schor (1996).

³² For instance, *The Birth of a Nation* as exemplary of this unmitigated form of racist imperialism re-emerges in more postmodern technological forms such as the extended machine-gun scenes of Rambo, the camera on Gulf War bombs, or the ideological othering of nature in *Twister*, all of which are to some extent indebted to Hegel's conception of the other as, by definition, strictly non-historical or temporally chaotic.

Jackson, whose orientalism is exemplified in the 1877 album, *Portraits of American Indians*. Hatoum's representation of herself as other makes a similar tear in the totality of the Hegelian scheme, as her use of the technology makes the video image of her body strictly non-colonisable. While Hatoum's naked body appears within both layers of screens, the look of the viewer is not resolved as a result, because the piece always maintains a level of hiding, or screening out of the very same coloured body. The temporal shift between the formal stills and the video segment is inscribed as dialectical, but their resolution is repeatedly delayed by the loudness of the soundtrack, the abruptness of the editing, and the slow motion, all leading to an abstraction of the video image. Correspondingly, given the way I have read Hegel's *Aesthetics*, the narrative split - the failure of the reconciliation of form and content or art's absolute self-overcoming - is deferred indefinitely in the very figure of the death of art.

Hatoum uses video to talk about her cultural/social/sexual alienation, but her video also makes clear that this alienation is characterised by in-betweenness. This state places her in a symbolic bind that she repeatedly makes reference to using the black and white, extremely grainy, repetitive, and doubly veiled image. What has interested me here, in trying to focus on the material, even visceral, change in the piece, is *how* the artist stages this in-betweenness/alienation. By resisting the clarity of simple autobiographical style, Hatoum is not making an uncomplicated demand to confront me with her already stable self-image. On the contrary, she uses her own body in a conceptual and collective way, which is focused in the multiplication of the screen. The stills from her parents' apartment are a commentary on the discreteness and purity demanded by modernist expression. But further, this aspect of the video includes a larger cultural critique of sanitation of the female body, especially the non-white female body. The transition to the static connotes entropy and ambiguity, which, in her own life, suggests an experience of the in-betweenness resulting from her forced exile, compounded with the prevailing invisibility and exclusion of visible minorities in the West. So, Hatoum's project is

connected to her experiences of immigration and isolation, but expressed as a broader crisis of history and interpretation within the collective language of communication media. To a significant extent, Hatoum comes at this problem from a circuitous viewpoint, and in this way, her method resembles that of Hegel. With a video art such as Hatoum's, the dualistic roots of the "telling" we expect from art is a difficult territory we pass over and displace repeatedly. With Hatoum and other contemporary visual artists and art theorists, I take the leap of faith that the implications of metaphysical theories of representation stretch beyond the theories that they maintain.

II

**THINKING THE ETHICAL FORM OF ART: TRANSLATION,
MEMORY AND (DE)FIGURATION**

Introduction

Any period to which its own past has become as questionable as it has to us must eventually come up against the phenomenon of language, for in it the past is contained ineradicably, thwarting all attempts to get rid of it once and for all.

Hannah Arendt, "Introduction" to *Illuminations*

What can Walter Benjamin's conceptions of translation and form, as expounded in "The Task of the Translator," do for my project of re-configuring the terms and conditions for interpreting video,³³ the language that is "not-yet-a-language"?³⁴ On what level can/does that work take place? As noted in the previous chapter, such a question refers us in turn to prevalent efforts to come to terms with the epistemological impasse in post-holocaust North Atlantic societies that, for instance, Arendt identifies in my epigraph. But let me insist again, that such a broad set of questions is best approached from within a close textual engagement with the particular set of axioms emergent in Benjamin's work. I want to ask, what would it mean to take seriously Benjamin's insistence that the "original" gives itself to translation? I hope to show that Benjamin's concept of

³³ In this chapter, I will also be concerned with further expanding the limits of the artworks that may be analysed in terms of the videographic incompleteness I have theorised as an artistic and theoretical practice. As I have said before, part of what it means to interpret contemporary art is to respect the lack of borders that exist between artforms. I am not aiming to draw out which interpretative mode may apply solely to video; rather I aim to stretch the notion of what may be called video to include other digital arts as well. In fact, I will be examining a multimedia installation piece that layers technological approaches to the image, much as did Hatoum's piece with photo stills, double screen, close-up and slow motion.

³⁴ Usually, Benjamin's work on reproducibility and technological change forms a basis for the work done linking his thought to contemporary artforms. I read "The Task of the Translator" here, because my interest in Benjamin lies more with translation as a metaphor for the history and writing through which we apprehend a multi-media artwork.

translation works to both displace and rewrite common conceptions of "history," "the social"³⁵ and "form," notions that my thesis tries to problematise. I want to argue that in his work on translation and history, Benjamin manages to address a region of "historical experience" that many poststructuralists have disparagingly argued discourse and art produce as a mere illegible effect. Thus, his work helps us re-configure the discursive entrance of the Other, whether it be the Other of the past, or the racial and sexual Other.

In Benjamin, this address takes shape as the relation between "the law" and language; for where the law is usually figured as the inner core of a language that secretly dictates, identifies and constitutes its silent other, in Benjamin, the very relation of subject/object and original/translation is re-written as "the law" as such: a law that does not rescue an original, a self or an other. On the contrary, this "law" inaugurates a modality of art and thinking that takes into account the mutual contamination of our *memories* and our *imaginings* of past and future texts and events. Importantly, contemplating the encroachment of futurity on creative acts of remembering is a posture already caught up in its own ethical implications. I will therefore understand Benjamin's work in "The Task of the Translator" as an attempt to theorise a truly diachronic and open concept of discursive practices and their borders. The result, I will claim, is an articulation of the problematic of a responsible artistic and critical practice. Trying to gesture toward the existence of difference as such through the cracks of discourse, then, Benjamin's method in a certain sense anticipates avant-garde work in video. As I hope will become clear, it is as central to Benjamin's method to fore-ground the non-distinction between text and image as it is part of video history to engage its own intertextuality.

But what justifies the conceptualisation of *translation* as the figure for the ethical movement of historical experience? In this context it will be important to ask, what is the mode of Benjamin's theorising? I will add right away that to a great extent, Benjamin's essay is itself loaded with futurity. For, unlike a metaphysical text such as Hegel's

³⁵ Also experiential, or contextual.

Aesthetics, his work gives itself to other disciplines, other readers, and other moments in history.³⁶ In other words, Benjamin's essay itself "bodies forth" a changing law for the role of artworks as metaphorical translations of past events and texts. Given the thematic link between Benjamin's theorisation of translation in "The Task of the Translator" and his conception of history in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," I will take into account both essays in suggesting that Benjamin aims to come up with a theoretical basis for an ethical aesthetics of modernity. He insists that a re-conception of how and why history is remembered and mediated in language is a crucial correlate to such an ethical order. Thus, I will read "The Task of the Translator" in order to elucidate its metaphorical structure. This includes the problematisation of form and content that embodies this "new" ethics. I argue in this chapter that Benjamin's conception of change as form can enable an open concept of difference. This will help me articulate the position that video takes up as a (de)figurative artform, and as a rejoinder to simple versions of radical art-making and theorising in our contemporary moment.

Part of what impels me in my encounter with Benjamin is that much video work engages the problematic of memory in a manner that refuses to give up the possibility of being able to commemorate, but without the reinscription of a primordial or static remembered fact. The process of questioning or association initiated with the viewer around the issue of remembering is crucial, for it links up with some of the most urgent questions that I pose to my own work as a scholar, and as a participant in the contemporary Western world. How are we to understand the relation between our

³⁶ In Hegel's *Aesthetics*, I found traces of a historical, genre-free and spiralling way of thinking about art. Yet as a theory it remains fundamentally unethical because it lives apocalyptically off the end of the death of art, like a judgement day prophesy. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Benjamin's insistence on historical inscription builds on Hegel (though he is influenced by Kant as well). Through an intellectual ancestry that includes art historians Winckelmann and Riegl, it is also evident that Benjamin was influenced by dialectical approaches to the history of art. See further, Iversen (14-6), Nägeli (1991) and Levin (1988). However, Benjamin adds a loop to the Hegelian spiral that is of a different order which I hope will become more clear. Therefore, Benjamin's work on form, on one hand, and reproductive media on the other, is seen by many as precursory to theories of the moving image, and even the digital image, and their abilities to double the image event.

engagement with objects, or representations of the past, and our knowledge of the past? And how does this relationship affect our postulations of how to change the future? How would one claim that the shifting of words (that I will claim Benjamin's essays work to do) poses a political challenge to the structure of thinking change - in our experience, in the social field? I want to suggest that the problem of memory can be highlighted by the sensory gaps created by video. For instance, Mark Cheetham has said in a reading of *Lamented Moments/Desired Objects*, Vern Hume uses "overlay," and "intermixing" of "visual cues and technological supports" so that the past becomes "manifest[ly] incomplete" (1991: 69-70).

Although differences between photography, film and video cannot be elided, as I have shown, the camera has generally been the locus of huge Western cultural ferment because of its disjunctive and double role in the changing nature of modern perception. Briefly, this disjunction can be mapped in terms of form and content. If the photographic image is on the one hand an utterly flat medium of presentation, seemingly without texture or material, evoking in a thin layer an exact illusion of the spatiality and physicality of figures, then that illusion itself makes the paradoxical promise of presence, while actually relying on the absence or exclusion of the figure. Thus, the camera has been said to be the ultimately formalised medium, if it is used to erase mediation in order to present the fullness of content (though clearly such absolute formalization is materially impossible). So, the Hollywood film and the cover of Life magazine represent such identity of form and content, like the fully classical artwork does for Hegel. This absolute (negation of) formalisation is akin to the kind of translation that Benjamin castigates: and, parallel to the demands of video art to expose the smug seduction of mass media, he demands a translation that mediates self-consciously. The possibility that Benjamin's theory of translation opens up vis-à-vis contemporary art - in which practices of installation and reproduction technologies are dominant forms - will serve as a major rallying point later in my discussion. I will focus on an installation by Sharon Switzer

and a video work by Jan Peacock in order to show how acts of remembering and narrating with the (video)camera and computer are multidirectional and destabilizing of notions of form and content. In this context, I want to see how Benjamin can help us clarify and further elucidate the links that I traced in the first chapter between problematising history and the videographic structure of excess and doubling. Before I deal with Benjamin's work on form in more detail, I will look closely at the concepts of otherness and law that come out of "The Task of the Translator," in order to finally speak about the continued impact of Benjaminian concepts on art and its theory by looking at selected artworks.

The figure of translation: inscribing difference(s) in the image-making event

Benjamin begins "The Task of the Translator" by insisting upon the directions that a consideration of translation should *not* treat. He suggests that reception and transmission of content are major obstacles upon which translators usually stumble. Benjamin's resistance to the theorisation of an "audience" in this essay is tied to his need to distinguish between "the intended object" of a translation and the "mode of intention" as such.³⁷ Only through this separation does it become possible to discern a law, and only then does it become possible not to idealise or freeze the temporal and mediating nature of translation proper. For if we begin by theorising a receiver, we will inevitably pre-determine that reception in some way. We are thus immediately caught in a circularity, which for Benjamin confers an intolerably apolitical quality on translation: if we have a pre-given, and hence, idealised, viewer or group of viewers, the room for change is closed, in terms of who is an author or who is affected by a certain artwork.³⁸ Benjamin thus

³⁷ Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" (1968), 74. Hereafter called TT.

³⁸ This separation of "mode" from "object" is heuristically valuable (though not ontologically given as such), because it allows Benjamin to theorise the form of translation instead of dealing with its various specific instantiations. This polemical passage probably also represents a contestation of reception theory, paramount in Benjamin's contemporary German critical circles. See note 9 in chapter one for a brief summary of the multiplex debate around spectatorship. Of course, it can be noted that Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" initiated much of the ferment around the

from the outset resists placing form on one side, and the possibility of an ethico-political position on the other.³⁹ Instead, he brings into play the controversial insight that translation's "essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information" (TT 69). This distinction should, in turn, precede a clarification of the "essential" element of language as it is worked on by translation. Importantly, however, the aspect of grounding that this limit-essence would provide is continuously suspended by the allegorical multiplication of this internal secret in (at least) two directions in the text. Two interconnected but divergent spectral notions structure Benjamin's thought as played out in "The Task of the Translator."⁴⁰ The first of these trajectories I will call the hypostatisation of experience, which is effected through a problematisation of form, a deferral of content, and a subsequent figuration of temporal difference.

"To comprehend [translation] as a mode one must go back to the original, for that contains the law governing the translation: its translatability" (TT 70). In such a view is implicit the idea that the law of translation concerns a relational movement: as such, this conception of the law serves to displace the interrogation of the limit, or the pre- or non-formal, to the theorisation of the form as and of change. Hent de Vries has summarised this argument as one that "gives us to think that language's essence would consist in the communication of communication, in the giving of the sign, rather than in

changing role of the spectator with technological innovation. Indeed, this essay is seen by many critics as "fundamental to the understanding of the impact of technological media on society" (Lovejoy 1). More generally, Benjamin was interested in the intersection between philosophic analysis and the larger rapidly changing culture. Hence, Benjamin's thought engages the terrain of the spectator versus the artwork as already riddled with paradoxes of proximity and distance, shock and aura, voice and silence, invasion and protection. In the essays I am focusing on, I am looking for places in which Benjamin uses different terms of debate, shifting away from explicit notions of spectator and aura, although no doubt my "readings" of the artworks in the last section are affected in important ways by the more commonly read "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

³⁹ Therefore it is immediately clear that Benjamin's thought provides a rejoinder to various critical models that would see political content as a separate, if complementary element in relation to the artwork's aesthetic form. See "Benjamin and art history: links to a history of video" in this chapter.

⁴⁰ I have chosen not to attempt to "evaluate" Benjamin's philosophical position (as if there is one such position in this essay, riddled with figures as it is), so as to avoid issuing caveats on how Benjamin is or is not useful beyond the intertextuality of the present essay. Instead, I imagine that any framing proposition creates its own limits within a theoretical endeavour: the risk is that we are the most likely to adopt the posture that we disavow the most vehemently.

any [particular] function of signification" (461). To illustrate this point, I want to look more closely at the way that Benjamin deals with the form/content problem in translation. Juxtaposed, the following two passages reveal this aspect of language and the task of translation it prescribes:

Translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test:
How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation, how close can
it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness? (TT 74-5)

Even when all the surface content has been extracted and transmitted, the primary concern for the genuine translator remains elusive. Unlike the words of the original, it is not translatable, because the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and in the translation. While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds (TT 75).

The manifest differential in the relation between language (more or less analogous to linguistic form as it is used in the previous passage) and content enables the apprehension of historical movement and change; but this shift in form *also* allows for the ushering forth of new meanings resulting from the "afterlife" of the artwork (TT 73). Here we can see Benjamin constructing an image of a translation-process that inevitably presents itself in a signifying capacity, yet which remains inevitably incomplete. For even though translation is "one of the most powerful and fruitful historical processes" (TT 73), it also "ironically transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm....The original can only be raised there anew and at other points in time" (TT 75). We are not to look upon this "transplant" with sentimentality or self-pity: we must in its *form*, as in the structure of the "monad" of the historical subject, recognise "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."⁴¹ Within this schema, we can look to video, as I have characterised it, for an ability to produce memorisation without reproducing a memory.

⁴¹ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 263.

The insistent movement of translation thus enacts the impossibility of the unification of form and meaning. Another way of saying the same thing is that when conceived of as analogous to translation, the artwork banishes the perfection of form (something which would actually guarantee its vanishing if we recall Hegel's system). For a historically variant form never becomes transparent in its perfection; it disallows its own erasure and substitution by content. Instead, the form of the translation has a complex relation to the form of the original, which appears in the non-mimetic structure of excess:

As regards the meaning, the language of a translation can - in fact, must - let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself (TT, 70).

Here, Benjamin apparently wants to signal that it is the fallacy of our languages of literary and art interpretation to oppose meaning and form, considering that it is the aim of translation to make the meaning of one text resonate in the form of another.

Remembering from the first chapter the difficulty facing video critics when trying to apply categories of form and content in interpreting video, allow me to trace an analogy here. It is worth restating that the form/content dualism is demystified by the formal multiplication of the video screen as a flattening device. In Benjamin's theatre of mimesis, form is reconceived as a *supplement*; and the task of the translator is to make it appear as such. Similarly, the task of the video-maker and video writer is to expose this theatre in the video event. What is so significant about this model of supplement is that it also allows us to conceive of video as a *form* of social address. Therefore, through Benjamin's model of form, we can respond to the historic embeddedness of video in popular and populist culture.

Again, when writing art theory, this (material, social) limit is best approached as a reconsideration of the task of writing history. If, as Benjamin suggests, there is a

redemptive element in the law of translation as change, this consists in the fact that it is always temporally and spatially inscribed: the task, for the translator/ philosopher /historian, "consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing *life of history*" (TT 71, [my emphasis]). In other words, "he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one" ("Theses" 263). Posing the idea of translation in this way thus allows us to imagine a relational law that is not totally contingent, that is, it is not doomed to act retroactively in an endless solipsism: in fact, the law I am naming here is immanent in and to the artwork. This means that apriorism is irrelevant to my discussion of form. Nor, however, does Benjaminian translation leave the "real" or "original" or "material" unaddressed. On the contrary, "by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of any importance to the original" (TT 71). Inasmuch as translation should not attempt to restore the identity of the original, the past, the real, or even the image, then, its value consists in the insistent presentation of *temporal and formal difference as such*. In other words, the form of this law (or the law of this form) of translation, is not rigid or closed; indeed, it "gives" itself to the future: it is already loaded with the futurity of transformation. Moreover this "law" does not disallow narrative or memory: but like video, it bears witness to its own discrepancies and deformations, rendering it more difficult to simply "tell" something with art, and thus mitigating the violent erasures inherent in writing a history of representation.

History, otherness and relationality

Reformulating the question of translation in this way has profound ethical consequences. And the second of the divergences in "The Task of the Translator," which I have already mentioned briefly, is the transformed notion of otherness that it puts into play. I want to propose that a line of thinking that engages repeatedly with the epistemological stakes of formal change, by extension retains a fully historical position vis-à-vis its own ontological claims. By "historical" here, I mean the life and contemporaneity of a history that, according to Paul de Man, appears in Benjamin as "the errancy of language, this illusion of a life that is only an afterlife (1986: 93). More specifically, Rodolphe Gasché has characterised Benjamin's treatment of difference in the following way:

In differing in [Benjamin's] active sense, can the Other, truth or originary difference, be anticipated....Although the difference thus created does not imply clearly divided realms (nor a constituted Other), it anticipates the possibility of the radical Otherness of truth whose thinking does not fall into the powers of man [sic](101).

Benjamin's concept of difference is in itself already a moral scene since it is a difference that does not constitute or expose the Other; instead, it must "expose us to him or her" (Nancy 66). Furthermore, this profoundly ethical gesture opens the way for a linkage between revolutions within and without language. Effectively, de Man concludes, in Benjamin "what is called political and historical is partly due to purely linguistic reasons, so we can replace political by poetical" (1986: 93). Benjamin's interpreters have remarked that his thinking originates a kind of openness that results from the non-totality of his metaphors. And with Nancy, I would argue the radicality of such a notion in terms of the collective transformation of our socio-political imaginings, for

it is...a question of a communitarian existence of the work such that, whatever its genre or its hero...the communication of this work incompletes it instead of completing it....For the unworking is

offered wherever writing does not complete a figure, or a figuration, and consequently does not propose one, or does not impose the content or the exemplary message of the figure. (...).in which nothing holds back, where nothing remains within a singular limit, where, on the contrary, everything is communicated and set up for identification (Nancy 79-8).

So, the transgression between the poetic and the theoretical is also paradigmatic of Benjamin's method. It is precisely this non-distinction that plays a dramatic function in illustrating how art can write/work on creating meaningful change, and how theory cannot distinguish itself, but remains parasitic on, this writing/working. Benjamin's explicit reliance on the (non-completed) imagistic quality of theorising thus accommodates the experience and interpretation of art. On this point, I will insist that it is significant that Benjamin offers a theory of translation, *not* a complete theory of language. His theory is itself filled with metaphors; however, it does not try to tie these metaphors into one single image that will make it make sense for us. It seems meaningful that Benjamin is willing to leave each metaphor (the robe, the seed) unfinished, holding back the exact content or meaning of each singular figure. Again, according to de Man, Benjamin admits that what is properly a mode of the artwork or translation cannot be pinned down in a *singular* effort to theorise that mode. In turn, this incomplete imagemaking points to the necessary timeliness and partiality of any one type of intervention:

Benjamin, who is talking about the inability of trope to be adequate to meaning, constantly uses the very tropes which seem to posit the adequation between meaning and trope; but he prevents them in a way, displaces them in such a way as to put the original in motion, to de-canonicalise the original, giving it a movement which is a movement of disintegration, of fragmentation (1986: 93).

This aspect of Benjamin's theory speaks to the conclusions that I reached in trying to write (about) video in chapter one. For video's multiplex discourse comes up against questions of historical methodology; and like Benjamin, video critics have been forced to

theorise the principle of historical incompleteness as central to video's role in contemporary culture.

To summarise, reading Benjamin for a complex and open idea of alterity allows a counterpoint to the discourse of entities. Because if you take his notion of the other, it explicitly concerns that concept in its *relationality*: it is thus freed up from any simple notion of meaning. I have tried to show that this typology of difference can be detected in Benjamin's re-conceptualisation of the temporal relation between the original and the translation. Through this formal manoeuvre, the translation can be considered in its otherness: the formal connection is there, but allows for, rather than forecloses, a dynamic notion of history. Articulated in this way, form is perhaps no longer even form; or at least it is not the form that stands in opposition to content, nor a form that denotes the metaphysical gesture of "molding" matter: this "form" is of another order. It concerns being able to describe something as tangible yet fundamentally immeasurable. Witness the manifest split in the word "form" as it is defined in the English: in its philosophical usage, as that which gives us the knowledge of a thing's "inner" thingness, and in its colloquial usage, the outward or apparent shape or configuration of a thing. While the former usage figures form at the threshold of the emergence of depth, the latter usage posits form as surface: the opposite, or the blockage of depth. Seemingly, Benjamin's law of "form" deals with the philosophical juncture of outward shape and inner structure: exposing the dialogical and diachronic life of "form" as an epistemological category. Simultaneously, the oppositional and complementary status of content is rendered defunct.

Again I want to point to the link between Benjamin and the art historical position I have theorised that sees videographic discrepancy as enacting a temporal and spatial disjunction in form. For the non-completion of form that his essay enacts and valorises is analogous to the resistance to transparency effected using the non-resolution of the video image. Using a plurality of images, signals, luminosities, framings and metaphors, video

artists and writers continue to draw attention to this non-resolution as an opening onto the world. The notion that the art work is not all illusion, but rather, works to reveal the strong tie between art and the experience of living, emerges as the common concentration in "The Task of the Translator" and video art. My point has been to show that the desire - common among those who, like me, write (about) video - to historicise the distinction between form and ground, and form and content, is central to Benjamin's theory of translation. Shortly, I will turn to two other essays where he addresses that thematic more explicitly.⁴²

But first allow me tangentially to address if and how Benjamin's theory of translation/history takes up a differentiating place with respect to poststructural theories, most notably Derrida's philosophy of the limit. In "Des Tours de Babel," Derrida provides quite a subtle reading of "The Task of the Translator," asserting persuasively that Benjamin's "requirement of the other as translator" is the structure of the "relation of life to sur-vival," showing that "the survivor, is itself in the process of transformation," and that "[translation] gives itself in modifying itself" (1985: 183). But Derrida predictably concludes that Benjamin "repeats the foundation of the [transcendental] law" (196). The grounds for this conclusion are that according to Benjamin's definition, the task of the translator is "confined to the duel of languages" because, on Derrida's reading, "only the law allows, starting from the distinction between original and translation, acknowledgement of some originality in the translation...as originality of expression" (196). This assertion of simple causality seems contradicted by all evidence I can find in the essay, where Benjamin says, quite on the contrary, that "no fact that is a cause is for that reason historical" (70). As outlined above, Benjamin attempts to articulate that "expression" *is* not in the original (one side of a presupposed polarity); it *is* in the ever-

⁴² Of course, I have chosen to examine but one place where Benjamin's interest in the small interventions that bring forward a poetics of the surface or form as a politics of incompleteness. Other theorists have located analogous theoretical positions in Benjamin's work on physiognomy (Nägele 1991: 105-7), drawing (Bois 1990: 178-80), the haptic (Iversen 15-6), and the museum (Comay 32-5).

changing in-betweenness of the polarity, irreverent of its directionality and, by extension, of its very constitution as a polarity.

I find Derrida's critique of Benjamin facile: he chooses to dismiss Benjamin's argument about the poetic potential in ever-changing, non-complete form, when he focuses instead on Benjamin's concept of "pure language." I have tried to point out that in a generous reading, the "original" and "pure language" do not in fact constitute internal or sublime reference points in this essay. It might be interesting to think of Benjamin as or at the limit of a poststructuralist theory of translation/history/art, rather than vice versa, since it is not difficult to see how the Derridean absolute iterability allows the inscription of historical change in a way that is formally very close to Derrida's law of translation. Indeed, this might explain why Derrida has such problems deconstructing Benjamin - perhaps Benjamin is more proto-deconstructive than Derrida will admit. While Derrida exclaims that perhaps "Benjamin proposes that we think the possibility of a historical linguistics" (176), I have tried to show, taking backward steps, that Benjamin makes the allegorical moves that *produce* such a possibility. While Derrida suggests that "the law does not command without demanding to be read, deciphered, translated" (184), I understand *the law as nothing more than that demand*.

Clearly, however, I cannot claim (having developed as a scholar in the thoroughly Derridean feminist terrain of early 1990's North America) to read Benjamin without Derrida, either. Yet, the most telling aspect of Derrida's treatment of Benjamin's translation theory in "Des Tours de Babel," is the way that Benjamin's thought gets reinscribed in Derridean terms: perhaps it is Derrida who is caught up in "a classic philosopheme" of legitimisation, not Benjamin (190). Accordingly, the law of translation becomes, for Derrida, "the trace" (185) that marks the relation of languages. Similarly, the movement of translation is re-written as the "re-marking [of] the affinity among languages" (186). As an alternative to this philosophical territorialisation, I would take into account that, for Benjamin, "languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a

priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they *want* to express" (72, my emphasis). Love and friendship, then, would be better analogies than the contract and debt metaphors that Derrida thematises. Like the scene of translation, the scene of love is not about content,⁴³ but about the very ability to say no to the progress of history while formulating a memory of the poetic experience of love. Thus, for instance, homosexual love can be seen as a counterpoint to the relentless "natural life" of sexuality, as it brings the focus of the scene of love away from the contents of ancestors and inheritors, toward the act of enunciating redemptive love for itself. As an example, I want to point to the structure of excess in this passage in which Selma Lagerlöf, a Swedish nineteenth-century author writes to another woman author with whom she is in love, in defense of another kind of love, which is non-reproductive, yet profoundly historical:

I see so many relationships between women in Copenhagen that I must come to some clarity on what nature wants with it. (Of course I am speaking of completely honourable women). Therefore I now formulate the definition of love like this: the desire to know someone to feel one has the right to live. The one whom no one loves must die. What do you think? Let us leave the *pre-historic* definition, it is ugly. But my feeling for you was never ugly. I don't think it ever was. Only say, that love has not said all that it has to say because it lets the world continue. It is not for the living more than for the becoming. And so, why could one not love any person just as highly? (24, [my emphasis])

⁴³ As psychoanalysts would have it, pre-Oedipal, Oedipal or otherwise.

Benjamin and art history: links to a history of video

The more crucial works are, the more inconspicuously and intimately tied their meaning content [*Bedeutungsgehalt*] is tied to their material content [*Sachgehalt*]. [This] correlation gives rise to reciprocal illumination between, on the one hand, the historical process and radical change and, on the other hand, the accidental, external, and even strange aspects of the artwork. [T]he most meaningful works prove to be precisely those whose life is the most deeply embedded in their material contents...

Walter Benjamin, "Rigorous Study of Art"

Certainly, Derrida is also among those French thinkers who has admitted the radical potential of other Benjaminian topologies to expose the knot of interpretation. In this passage in *The Truth in Painting*, for example, Derrida comments on "The Author as Producer":

Benjamin...urges the author as producer: that he not be content to take up a position, through discourse, on the subject of society and that he never, even with these revolutionary products, stock up an apparatus of production without transforming the very structure of that apparatus, without twisting it, betraying it, attracting it out of its very element (1987: 151-2).

"The Author as Producer" also brings Benjamin close to the set of problems I have examined with video. For in this essay, he prescribes the proper attitude artists and art theorists must take to the false separation between aesthetic and political concerns, or as he says, the "unfruitful debate" of the relationship between form and content (221). As noted by Derrida, Benjamin demands, in Brecht's footsteps, that the artist/writer "not supply the apparatus of production without, to the utmost extent possible, changing it" (228).⁴⁴ But in addition, Benjamin offers a more difficult point that is no less political. It is approached through the concept of technique. Benjamin defines technique as that

⁴⁴ In the most well-known instance in the field of art history, Benjamin has spoken about the "betrayal" of the handed-down apparatus in terms of what reproductive technologies do to the auratic artwork. See, primarily, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

which "concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of its time" (222). This "concept makes literary products directly accessible to a social, and therefore materialist analysis" (222). The debate around form and content is empty, says Benjamin, because "it has not advanced beyond the monotonous arguments for and against: *on the one hand*, the correct political line is demanded of the poet; *on the other*, it is justifiable to expect his work to have quality. Such a formulation is of course unsatisfactory as long as the connection between the two factors, political line and quality has not been *perceived*" (221). As a response to this need, Benjamin claims that this connection is constituted in the idea that the "tendency of a literary work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct. That is to say, the politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency" (221). In other words, if expressed as a separate political "content," radical socio-political concerns fail to be communicated, because these concerns should be constituted in the very exercise of aesthetic considerations and experimentation. Again, this approach to the problem, which Benjamin calls dialectical (rather than linear and causal), allows the critic to "insert [artworks] into the living social context" (222).

So instead of taking up Benjamin's explicit engagement with film or photography *per se*, I trace a different path in the effect of Benjamin's work on the crisis-ridden field of art history. Perhaps this path is more formal, but it is also more historical. In discussing Benjamin's "ethical poetics" of modernity and introducing the concept of technique, I have tried to illustrate that visual art - and more specifically, video art - presents itself as a discursive paradigm that has limits and structures of signification, like any particular language (although this does not mean that distinctions between visual and textual structures do not still apply). In other words, we cannot imagine a realm of art that is separate from social realities, nor from the written discourse that accompanies and supports it.⁴⁵ This is why Benjamin places so much emphasis on the act of

⁴⁵ For example, as Rebecca Comay points out in her analysis of the photographic work of Christian Boltanski, the traditional anthropomorphism of both architecture and its theory is simultaneously an

interpretation/translation in establishing the political value of a work of art. Accordingly, leading video critic Sean Cubitt has urged, citing Benjamin, that the artistic use of video makes it imperative to "historicise theories of art," for "theoretical activities are as much bound up in the particular historical circumstances of their making as any other practice" (1993: 40).

Especially in North America, the rift between material and meaning is often made more irreparable by the domination of identity politics in exhibition and curatorial culture. In a forum on the Whitney Biennial of 1993, Silvia Kolbowski said that "under the rubric of the political in this country...there is a tendency to favour one [artistic and critical practice] over the other, 'activist' or 'aesthetic.' They don't have a productive relationship to one another; they are not allowed to complicate each other" (25).⁴⁸ In Canada, for example, this unfortunate practice has contributed to the ghettoisation of a whole tradition of excellent video work dealing with the ambiguities and silences that surround lesbian identity. As a rejoinder to this problematic tendency, and as productive of the transgressive poetic postures I have outlined above, Benjamin's thought joins up with the model advocated by Yve-Alain Bois, who asserts that thinking about the history of the modern period in regard to art

is a matter...of locating a certain number of operations that brush modernism against the grain, and of so doing without, as is the case with all the iconologies concerned with this art, countering modernism's formal certainties by means of the more reassuring and naive ones of meaning. To the contrary, these operations split off from modernism, insulting the

exemplary *guarantor* and a forceful *reflection* of the obliteration of difference in the fascist building as a culmination of the redemptive Western artwork (32-7).

⁴⁸ I do not wish to elide the fact that the rift created by identity politics in cultural practices and their interpretation is a complex political crisis whose ramifications reach far beyond my concerns in the study of visual art. Mainly, this crisis has revolutionised understandings of race and sexual difference in all areas of scholarship, where unified identities have become increasingly questionable as rallying points for community-formation, and its attendant legal and social activism. See further Butler (1990), Bhabha (1993), and Spivak (1993). Nevertheless, my attempt to understand strategies of video-making as a complex combination of aesthetic and political concerns is one place where this crisis can be localised. In chapter three, I will examine how this is also the case among feminists who attempt to re-work the body-mind split, and in turn, how the problem of the body is instantiated in video, installation and literary metaphor.

very opposition of form and content ...which is itself formal due to its own binary logic....For it is thus a matter of redealing modernism's cards--not of burying it and conducting the manic mourning to which, for many years now, a certain type of "postmodernism" has devoted itself, but seeing to it that the unity of modernism, such as it had been constituted through the opposition of formalism and iconology, is fissured from within and that certain works can no longer be read as they were before (25, 29).

Furthermore, Bois has argued elsewhere that locating these operations is a matter of being "committed to the study of the *possibility* of meaning, of the structure of signification as such." The ultimate goal of historicising "form as a supplement" in histories of art is to develop a "more direct and less stratified way of connecting the history of art, the history of ideas, and the history of society" (1990: xxvi).

Similarly, in a recently translated essay called "Rigorous study of Art," Benjamin asserts that in "genuine" studies of artworks, "formal questions are very closely tied to historical circumstances" (90). He posits himself against "positivist art chatter," with which most of his contemporary art historians were occupied, as well as against an art or theory that would be "interested in problems of form as such" (86).⁴⁷ What Benjamin points out in this essay as well is that if attention is paid at the level of the change in form, the work can be historically experienced. In marked contrast, a focus on the iconographical at the expense of form will make art and its history universalising and synchronic.⁴⁸ The legacy of the inherited dichotomisation of material (formal) and iconographical analysis and production - a rift undoubtedly made worse by Greenbergian formalism - means that Benjamin's thought can *still* provide a rejoinder to the predominant assumption in much current visual art methodology that the history of art is somehow a less "real" kind of history. Rendering the distinction between art and life as a

⁴⁷ This latter method would rely on the reduction of form to style, exemplified by the dogmatic formalist school of Heinrich Wölfflin (1950).

⁴⁸ Benjamin did in fact engage directly with the epistemological problems of form and the philosophy of history as relevant to the study of visual art. He admitted to being influenced by Alois Riegl, a Viennese art historian who was virtually untranslated and ignored until very recently because of his attempts to forge a "philosophically informed, interdisciplinary symptomatology of form" (Levin 79). See also, Lant (1995) and Iversen (1993).

simple dichotomy is often effected by ignoring the connection upon which Benjamin constantly insists, between the form - or the use of the material - and the historical circumstances. In fact, seeing art history in Benjaminian terms allows us to conclude, with Foucault, that distinctions between intellectual, art, economic and philosophical history are ideological.⁴⁹ To illustrate these concepts further, I want to turn to some video and multimedia work that inaugurates an important questioning process of distinctions between past and future, art and life, form and content and art and writing.

Wallace & Theresa

Jan Peacock's *Wallace & Theresa* (1995) consists of the slow repetition and overlapping of spoken, written and signed phrases describing the main "character's" feelings about her encounter with writing. Selected passages from poems by high modernist Wallace Stevens and the autobiographical writing of performance artist and writer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha are layered in a shallow screen-space circumscribed by writing on the screen, on a transparent writing board, and an insistent voice-over. In the beginning of the tape, a narrator reads in both English and Korean Kyung Cha's poem, written in third person, about writing and identity. She repeats, "She would live if she could display it before her, and become its voyeur...she says to herself, if by writing she could abolish real time." Cha's traumatic experience of oppression and isolation as an Asian woman is communicated through a desire to write her story. Importantly, however, the story is not offered in the video: only the desire itself is thematised. In the next overlapping sequence, the source of narration is blurred: a man, reading a Wallace Stevens excerpt, urges the woman to take up the pen, to "tell me the story of all these things, tell even us." The woman's hand takes up a pencil, but each word she writes becomes unintelligible

⁴⁹ See note 14, ch. 1.

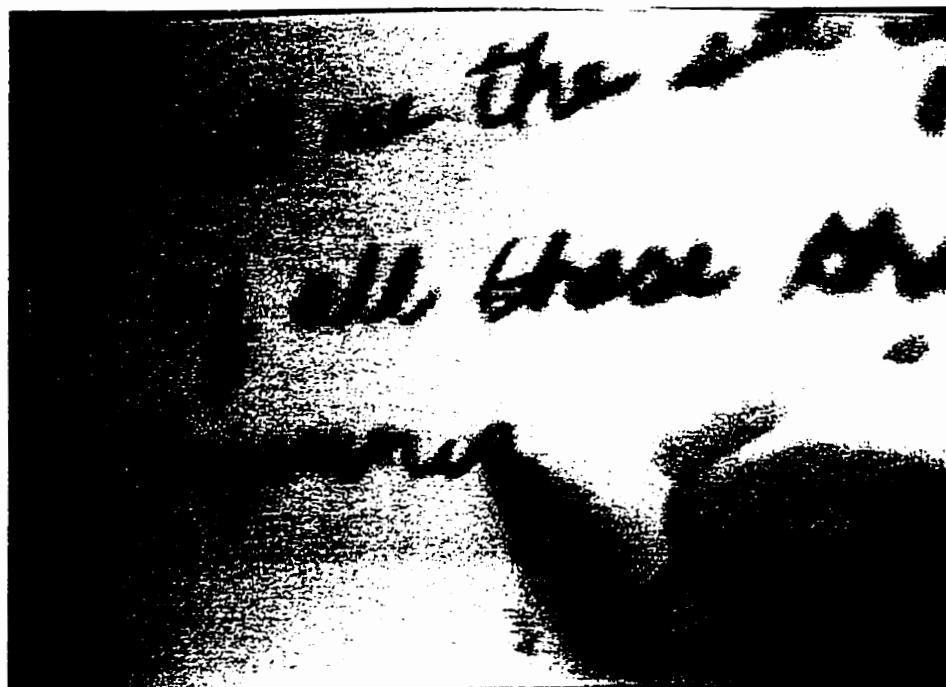


FIGURE 3 Jan Peacock, *Wallace & Theresa* (video still), 1985, videotape, colour, 8:35 minutes. Courtesy of V Tape, Toronto.

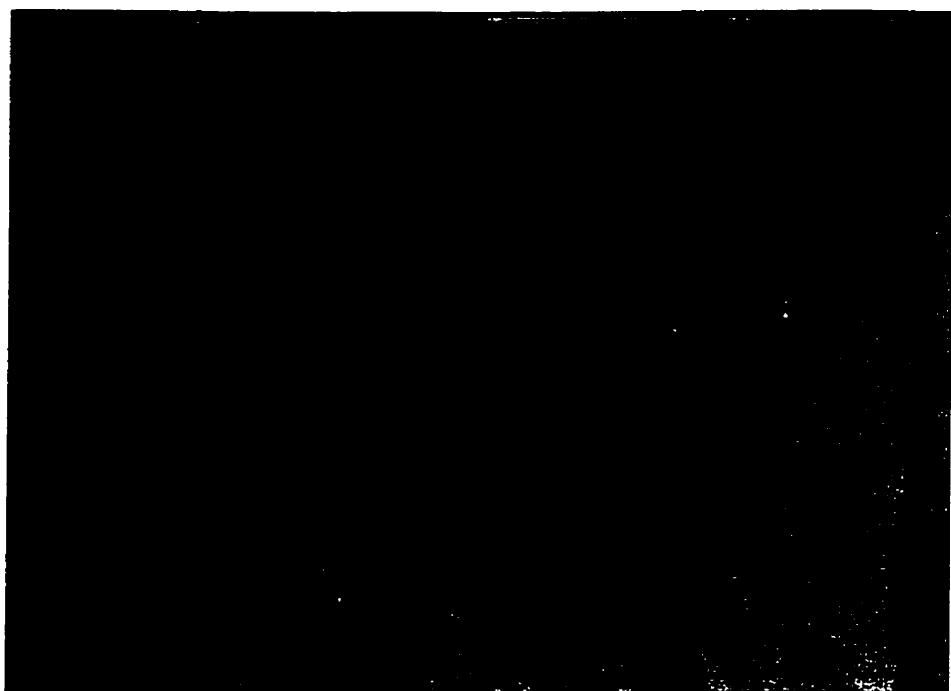


FIGURE 4 Jan Peacock, *Wallace & Theresa* (video still), 1985, videotape, colour, 8:35 minutes. Courtesy of V Tape, Toronto.

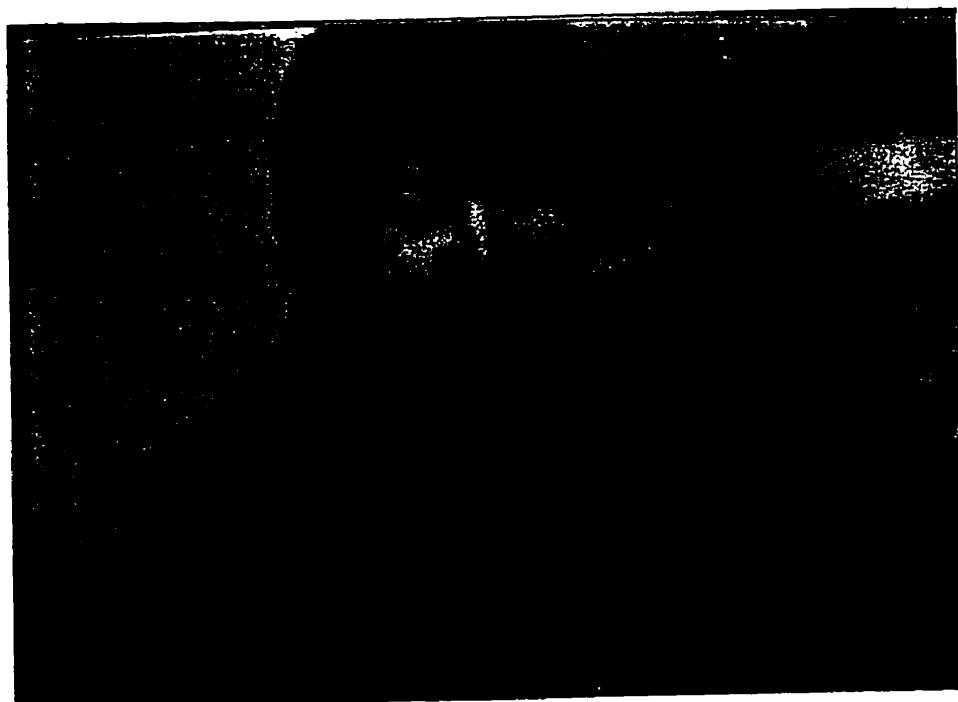


FIGURE 5 Jan Peacock, *Wallace & Theresa* (video still), 1985, videotape, colour, 8:35 minutes. Courtesy of V Tape, Toronto.

immediately afterward. The act of writing is suspended, its grammar fails; and yet, its form is repeated and changed into various modes. Clearly, the blurring of the words and the source of narration are both part of the video content, but in fact, they take on their meaning as formal elements.

There is a moment in the tape where I realise that the narrators are narrating one another *reciprocally*, though historical power dynamics still make this reciprocity uneven. The collage of narration is the only event of the tape: the audible or visible statements actually treat only the event of narration itself. Therefore, no representation takes place. The impulse to narrate and interpret is turned back on itself. Moreover, the theme of refusal of content and deferred reciprocity is partly constituted in the constriction of the video-screen space: in fact, the video screen is treated as a magic writing pad, where the text appears and disappears. As if to draw attention to the inability of the video to actually memorialise Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, a sign language interpreter slowly begins to sign the phrases from the voice-over. Subsequently, the double writing pad/screen breaks up into hectic electronic blur, as the soundtrack gets louder and more imperative as well, reading "I heard the signs... Remnants... Missing... Never the same... Absent" are repeated continually. In the last minute of the video, a photo still of Kyung Cha with her lover/friend floats across the screen, covered by the word absent. The stiffly posed snapshot aesthetic of the still playfully illuminates the shallow space that characterises the rest of the video. What is actually represented here is the gap in representation, the silent struggles that an autobiography can only miss. Nevertheless, cultural and racial difference is *presented*, because the most intense audial presence in the tape is the Korean voice-over. Even though the meaning escapes the Western viewer, the sense of the voice of the Other as a form of insistent address cannot be ignored.

The false museum and the digital image

Another example of an intertextual, multi-media installation that I will claim displays this kind of videographic sensibility is the recent untitled installation by Sharon Switzer, in which Switzer placed small, open aluminium boxes, filled with rows of once-lit candles on shelves slightly below eye-level. Inserted in each open lid is a digital image showing a detail of an old photograph portraying women's hands. To produce this image, the artist scanned the photograph into computer memory and re-configured its orientation, scale and cropping in photoshop. The images of hands are overlaid with digits inscribed in small circles, creating an asymmetrical pattern. By using computer-reproductions of photographs (themselves already reproduced images), Switzer layers techniques, and speaks about the prevalent replacement of reality by a dizzying collage of images. On the wall above the boxes, a series of seemingly randomly placed, numbered pins form a non-figurative constellation; just as some of the hands in the photographs are "pinned down" by numbers. It is important to note that the photographs used are anonymous *trouvailles* from old flea-markets and bargain stores.

The way that Switzer forms the viewing experience is also significant: the construction of an angled wall creates a corridor or passage-way, directing the gaze and the pace of the viewer to conform to a typical museum-walk. But this museum-viewing experience entails a discovery of several enigmas, through the deliberate contradiction of the museatic form and the lack of "content" (that which the museatic form conventionally exists to make apparent: information). Short of "viewing something," the viewer is forced to think about the freezing of time that "viewing something" produces. Around this disjunction, then, a series of questions are provoked: which faces belong to these hands? when were the candles lit, and why were they put out? do the numbers add up while pinning down?

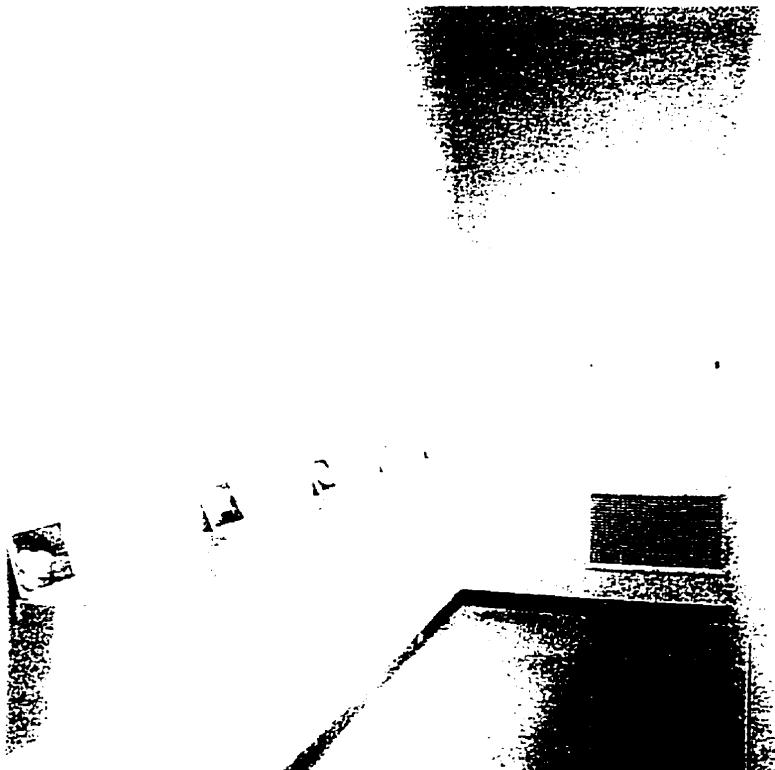


FIGURE 6 **Sharon Switzer, *Untitled* (multimedia installation), 1997, aluminium and glass boxes, candle wax, digital images, plastic map pins.** Courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE 7 Sharon Switzer, *Untitled* (detail), 1997, aluminium and glass boxes, candle wax, digital images. Courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 8 Sharon Switzer, *Untitled* (detail), 1997, digital image. Courtesy of the artist.

Switzer raises a few crucial questions regarding the enigmatic character of this installation in her own writing. She says that "an unfamiliar old photograph tries to tell me something, but only allows visual clues which solve nothing. It provokes a process of remembering that is at the same time thwarted by the image. A process that is about memory, not those remembered."⁵⁰ In Switzer's work, then, the detailed digitalised image of an unknown and yet familiar hand is reused, not to produce a memory, but to shore up a thought-process around the idea of remembering as it takes place increasingly through sophisticated imaging processes. More specifically, my sense is that instead of bringing something lost or historically past "into view" - reproducing it - Switzer's work in Benjaminian fashion problematises the very distinction between art and history; signalling the principle that as it is recollected and projected, historical difference is *made*: in art-making, in writing, in viewing. Switzer's is a modality of installation that shows that art demands to be judged and experienced (the two being intimately connected) historically. Thus, the logic of form and content, simple and dichotomous, is placed, poetically and pragmatically, under suspicion.

The historical references in Switzer's work - personal and mass death and mourning, Jewish identity, women's invisibility, the gendering of history - emerge as she interrogates institutionalised and sanctioned or sanctified acts of "recording," "mapping," and "remembering" such as walking through the museum, lighting the votive candle, photographing, pinning up and pinning down. An old photographic image has ended up in her installation, bringing it - and its history - "forward in time."⁵¹ Instead of building a formal space for her (auto)biographical "content," Switzer writes, acknowledging the falsity if the promise of the reproduced image, that the loss of these unknown women is perhaps "more [absolute] because I can hold this photograph still."⁵²

Conclusion

⁵⁰ Unpublished artist statement for Switzer's *Untitled* (multi-media installation), February, 1997.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Recalling Benjamin again, the otherness that these works put into play functions in a non-restitutive way. In other words, Switzer's reused images, and Peacock's reciprocal narration and deferred content, do not cover over the materiality and otherness of the past or racial and sexual others. But like in Benjamin, that enigmatic region always seeps through - and sometimes explodes - to the present, especially in times of threat and danger. Although neither work offers a documentation of lives lived, there is nonetheless a way in which Switzer and Peacock rescue these women from oblivion. But as Benjamin says, "a real translation is transparent; it does not *cover* the original" (TT 79). Clearly, the idea of "leaving uncovered" the aporia inherent in any kind of representation forms a central thematic in much avant-garde use of video, computer and other reproductive media. Switzer's *reinstalation* of the unknown cameratic image, and Peacock's usage of the screen to illustrate the deferral of autobiographical content precisely approaches this radical diachrony. While materiality and experience are alluded to in their otherness, Switzer's cropped digital image of the female hands, and Peacock's quotations and videofilmed photo of Theresa, are not meant to assure a deep or inner thingness or identity of a particular woman.

For, as Raymond Bellour notes, avant-garde work in film, video, computer and photography has repeatedly come face to face with its relation to its own physicality: the incompleteness of its own memorialisation. If my thesis fits into the larger intertextual discourse of a general "history of figuration," I want to emphasise, along with Bellour, that this discourse is "more and more a history of *defiguration*" (15). Because, just as Benjamin's law of translation theorises a constantly changing relation between what is supposed to be a "translation," or "transfer" of meaning, "an image can at the same time be an analogic image (in the photographic sense of the word) and an image which escapes this analogical definition" (15). In the hands of an artist/translator, then, that excessive

meditation can shine through, and the form becomes re-configured time and time again, to thwart the emergence of depth.

III

**SKIN/SCREEN/SURFACE-BODY: TOUCHING THE BORDER
OF VIDEO AND METAPHOR**

Introduction

Desire is developed through an aesthetic that transforms the depth of contact with the other into surface of contact. Viewers are positioned in a way that forces them to abandon their negation of the other.(...).in order to be attentive to the very surface of the screen where the body and the electronic apparatus come into contact.

Christine Ross, "To Touch the Other"

In this final chapter, I continue to explore terrains in which form can be thought differently. I am still concerned with perverting models that would understand form as a medium, or contour, that is, at best, transparent. Because such a model implies that at worst, form is a burden or a prologue to a transcendent content, whether this content be emotional, as in modernism, or idealized, as in classical metaphysical accounts. In short, I am looking for processes of opacification. I turn once more to video and its criticism, in the conviction that it can open up interstices where the social, material and residual (memory, the political unconscious, the corporeal) dimensions of experience mingle.⁵³

⁵³ I should point out again that I do not imagine the concerns I trace in contemporary video work to be uniquely addressed in one artform. On the contrary, issues of memory, spectatorship and the body have been extremely important within sculpture, installation, performance, photography and film. There is no doubt that engaging the body and the tactile has since the seventies constituted one principal thematic in artmaking of all kinds, particularly in work that deals with representations of sexuality and gender in each of the aforementioned artforms. For instance, I can only mention the fascinating work of Kiki Smith, Tony Caro, Louise Bourgeois, Karen Finley, Geneviève Cadieux and Atom Egoyan. However, I still want to maintain that although concerns and certain strategies are shared between these various material approaches, video art works the bodily address/caress in a precise form. Furthermore, there are many contemporary theories of the body that I am unable to bring in here, such as in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, Monique Wittig, Julia Kristeva and Nicole Brossard; and in notions of the abject, the grotesque, the carnivalesque and trauma. Clearly, this debate is itself too enormous to be satisfactorily addressed here. I have decided to concretize my argument about touch in one select video piece that is then juxtaposed with one novel in stories.

Again, I like to imagine such a search as an intervention into an already available discourse that is apprehended through various practices and presuppositions. In this chapter, I will combine readings of some important video criticism with my interest in feminism, because in both of these discourses, theorists have engaged with and questioned psychoanalytic and metaphysical theories of the body. An important bridge for feminists between poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, Michel Foucault will help me reformulate how the body might be rethought through its surface-image.

I want to draw out some important connections that I see between various recent attempts to figure the body as surface, or the surface-body, as a question of alterity. Expanding on this line of thinking, my interest lies in searching for discursive operations that complicate processes of "figuration," or, put differently, practices that show the imbrication of figuration and non-figuration, in order to question depth models. Here, I use "figuration" to connote both its epistemological and imagistic sense. My aim in this context will be to implicate touch with the body, and to intertwine the body with touch; to make, of the gesture toward the skin, not a simple meeting, but a juncture with many possibilities, many ways of multiplying the idea of "touching the body."

In general, the disciplining of the body through a splitting at the level of the sensory, or proprioceptive (where all bodily cognition is subsequently seen as retroactive, and always already conditioned by a separate mind), is the foundational apriorism of Cartesian ontology. Thus, the mind as a concept has been about foreclosing on discussions of the body. But ideas such as defiguration, and the sense of "touch" that I want to bring into play, are meant to throw suspicion onto such a hypothesis. One of the main assumptions that is at stake here is the location of the mind "in" the "interior" of the body. As I try to show, the mind's locatedness actually conditions the concept of the mind as such. And there is an important way in which the sense of the body changes along with the *sine qua non* of the mind. In my analyses, I will argue for the necessity of

thwarting the formation of new ontologies, for example,⁵⁴ of "woman" or of "lesbian;" and of safe-guarding the tension implicit in "representing the marked body," a tension that opens up and propels *more* experiences of and through our bodies. I will examine certain theoretical project(ion)s of thinkers whose work represents re-deployments of psychoanalytic and "anti"-psychoanalytic theories, as well as the "poetic" work of writer Rebecca Brown and the most recent video installation by Mona Hatoum.⁵⁵ Thus, I want to situate my own thinking within a multiplex feminist discourse and practice in order to be able to discuss (dis)similarities between video art and literature, metaphor and image, and skin and screen. Looking at how and why touching the body emerges in current video and literary projects, I attempt to understand how these practices turn on and transform conceptual oppositions as they inhere in approaching or using the body. Mine is thus a project of reconfiguring the activity of touching the surface of the body as a domain of inversions and ambiguities, a region in which dualities of covering and exposing, and hiding and revealing are made subject to another kind of mode, which I have termed, after Christine Ross, an "aesthetics of discrepancy."

The surface-body in psychoanalysis: Foucault meets feminism again

The topos of touching the body offers a possibility of intervening into psychoanalytic and metaphysical models that rely on divisions between normal and pathological, and inner and outer. In this section, I will try to cover some of the theoretical territory dealing with this notion, as the body has been a favoured area of cultural disturbance in critical theory in recent years. Following feminist theorists Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler in this

⁵⁴ Although with our examples, we inevitably already inflect the terms of our debates, and I am not trying to escape this bind.

⁵⁵ Let me repeat that I make use of these various selections in the belief that, first, any text, fictional, non-fictional or visual, is a place where theory may happen, and second, that the work of theorising is integral to forming a culturally textured basis for political agency and change.

endeavour, I hope to diverge from onto-genetic accounts of bodies while remaining able to speak of the social, sexual and racial situatedness and markedness of bodies.

But such a project is doubtless already destabilized by Michel Foucault's insight that the disciplining of bodies, or the *techne* of bodies, has been the primary logic of regulatory subjectivation throughout modernity. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Foucault often uses an insistently bodily rhetoric to mark the force of this subjectivating power, paralleling it with the circulatory and constitutive mutuality of the inside and outside of the body:

[This power] implied physical proximity and an interplay of intense sensations. The medicalisation of the sexually peculiar was both an effect and the instrument of this. Imbedded in bodies...the oddities of sex relied on a technology of health and pathology. And conversely, ... one had to try to detect [sexuality] - as a lesion, a dysfunction, or a symptom - in the depths of the organism, or on the surface of the skin....The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces...It wrapped the sexual body in its embrace (44).

However, later in the same work, as well as in various other interviews, Foucault also argues that reconceiving the surfaces of bodies is a crucial activity of resistance, for instance when he claims that "the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures" (157).

Approaching the skin - or the surface-body - thus emerges as a crisis-ridden notion within the work of Foucault, the thinker whose work on sexuality inaugurated much of the present ferment around the body in critical and art theory. It seems to me to be significant that this tension appears as Foucault struggles to overcome the limitations of psychoanalytic discourse. In his critique of psychoanalysis, it is no accident that the difference between inscription and production of the body-surface is a source of slippage. For what is at stake in such a critique is precisely the extent to which it is possible to deconstruct the ontological distance that has been created between a prior body and the

culture that inscribes itself upon this body as a retroactively observable fact. In turn, is it possible to show that this distinction is used to reify the status of beings as dichotomous, i.e., as "having" inner and outer "lives"?

Recently, feminists have turned toward those places in Freud, and Lacan's rereading of him, that deal with the body's place in subject formation. Both Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz have located the Foucauldian slippage I identified above *within* psychoanalytic descriptions of subject-formation. In "The Lesbian Phallus," Butler cites several of Freud's works on corporeality and pain to show that, for him, subjectivating power works through "suffusing the body with a pain that culminates in the projection of a surface, that is, a sexed morphology which is at once a compensatory fantasy and a fetishistic mask" (1993: 65). Similarly, she argues, this understanding can be detected in Lacan's work on the mirror stage, where the body emerges as coherent and unified through the projection of an imaginary specular image, called the imago, the externalised centre of the non-self-identical ego. As imaginary, the ego and the sense of the body are

the permanently unstable sites where the spatialised distinction [inside/outside] is perpetually negotiated; it is this ambiguity that marks the ego as imago, as an identificatory relation. Hence, identifications are never simply or definitively made or achieved; they are insistently constituted, contested and negotiated (76).

Butler thus finds in Freud and Lacan an opening in the material genesis of the ego, helping her explain the instability of the power of subjectivation, and the prevalence of "sexual pathologies" such as lesbianism. Inasmuch as both Freud and Lacan often idealized and naturalised one chain of identification, the heterosexual and genital one, this process depended on legislating the distance between the psychic and the material as ontological. Butler concludes that, in fact, "the very contours of the body vacillate between the psychic and the material" (66), exposing the distinction itself as ideological and repeated, not ontological and originary.

Elizabeth Grosz has also argued that, indeed, the surface is a key notion in any attempt to opacify the representability, or *a priori* status of the body, matter and the sensory. In this context, she advocates the exploration of "how the subject's exterior is psychically constructed; and, conversely, how the processes of social inscription of the body's surface construct a psychical interior: i.e. looking at the outside of the body from the inside, and looking at the inside of the body from the outside" (1995: 104). So, an analysis of skin and touch itself provides the occasion for a revaluation of the very distinction between the psychic and the physical, a problem which can thus only be articulated in part with the tools of psychoanalysis.

The use of the Skin Ego: Foucault meets Anzieu

We lack the vocabulary for kinesthetic "insights," for learning at the level of the body imago and its orientation in space.

Margaret Morse, "Video Installation Art"

Yet, another way of expanding the terms of my discussion of touch is through Didier Anzieu's thoroughly psychoanalytic work on the skin's role in subject-formation. According to Anzieu, his theorisation of the "Skin Ego" is meant as a rejoinder to the presupposition, especially prevalent among ego-psychologists such as Winnicott and Klein, of "an 'inner world and its 'internal objects'" (37). From a broader perspective, then, Anzieu identifies this quite crucial point of critique of much psychoanalytic theory, namely the largely unexamined and axiomatic conflation of what is so-called "intangible" or "invisible" with that which is internal. Problematising the spatialisation of subjecthood, Anzieu defines the Skin Ego as "a mental image of which the Ego makes use during the early phases of its development to represent itself as an Ego containing psychical contents, on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body" (40). Even

though he places the Skin Ego on a developmental timeline that is itself problematic, Anzieu thus agrees with Butler that the phantasm of the skin as a tactile container - "sac" is his word - for the inner world is, precisely, produced as a coping mechanism that conditions being and speaking among others: "the Skin Ego underlies the very possibility of thought" (41).

The Skin Ego, then, can perhaps be used to situate the unconscious as another example, this time of an "internal" phantasm, negatively defined by its lack of tactility. Importantly, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari in his footsteps, have taken issue with the notion of the unconscious as insufficiently theorised in terms of sociality and the limits of humanness. Along these lines, Anzieu's work can help to expand psychoanalytic boundaries in the conception of this unconscious. Indeed, Anzieu urges us to think the structure of the Ego, the "I," as "an envelope," making us face the "paradox that the centre is situated at the periphery" (9). I would go even further, to claim that this decisive experience of the skin in fact questions the very existence of a spatial, and morphological, "centre" of subjectivity (whether it be the brain or the skin), therefore making it impossible to speak of that centre as strictly psychical, or physical for that matter. Furthermore, the reason that I feel free, later in this chapter, to associate freely this image of the surface-body with examples in the arts, is that Anzieu himself admits that "the Skin Ego is a product of ... metaphorico-metonymic oscillation" (6). This observation is really significant, because when Anzieu's writing brings forward this complex notion of the surface-body as text, it opens a new way of approaching the problem of contextualising vision and the representations that frame it, a problem we have been addressing through an examination of video technology and art. The intertextual "oscillation" between text, the senses and the surface of the body that Anzieu gestures toward is particularly suited as a way to understand video's status as a postobject artform, and it will help me continue the theorisation of the discursive boundaries that video pushes. I will come back to this shortly.

But even though Anzieu's work foregrounds the role of the surface of the body, as it were, I consider his examination suspect because it is based on an ideology of mental health. For there is no doubt that Anzieu's intervention is steeped in foundational psychoanalytic distinctions between perverse and normal desires, and between a healthy ability, and a sick inability, to distinguish one's own borders. Indeed, the notion of the Skin Ego is itself a response to his observation of an explosion, over the past thirty years, of psychopathologies where changes in the experience of the skin and masochism both feature as particularly dominant symptomalogies:

Currently, more than half the psychoanalytic clientele comprises... borderline states, a state on the border between neurosis and psychosis. In fact, the patient in such a state is suffering from an absence of borders or limits. He [sic] is uncertain of the frontiers between psychical and bodily egos, between the reality ego and the ideal ego, between what belongs to the self and what to others, is unable to differentiate erogenous zones, confuses pleasant experiences with painful ones (7).

Clinically speaking, Anzieu provides patients "engaging in masochistic sexual behaviour or exhibiting a partial fixation on a perverse masochistic position" with mental harmony through the healing of the Skin Ego to form a sufficiently impermeable skin/envelope (41). Anzieu sees his clinical applications of the Skin Ego model as distinct from Lacan's models of the subject, because, "in Lacan's view, the Ego *normally* has [a self-alienated] structure," whereas for Anzieu, the "Mobius strip configuration is specific to borderline states" (n.124).⁵⁸

⁵⁸ One could doubtless use Lacan's later work to critique Anzieu on this point. Note, however, that Anzieu takes issue with Lacan on another point as well, on which I would to some extent agree with him: he accuses Lacan of "endless quasi-talmudic commentaries on [Freud's] texts, the mechanical application of his views, in the light, not of a new field of practice, but of the 'advances' made by philosophy... - the linguistic sciences in particular" (6). Structural linguistics probably did take Lacan away from questions of the imago or the bodily ego, leading to an increased reification of the division between language (symbolic) and the material, the Real becoming an unaddressed spectre in his later topological schemas. This may explain why neither Butler nor Grosz use Lacan's later work. For a good critique of how Lacan's Real can become a transcendent reference point in psychoanalytic theories, see "Arguing the Real" in Butler (1993).

Of course, Anzieu's account of the Skin Ego must, each time it is re-deployed, be historicised and localised, asking it, what is the (sexual, racial, social) marking of the skin that is destabilized? Under which social circumstances is it difficult, indeed, disadvantageous for one's own artistic or sexual practice, to think of the Skin Ego as either weak and flawed or whole and protective? Nevertheless, in his argument, Anzieu attempts to balance delicately between the significance of the body-surface in our experience, and the extreme threat to body-cohesion and control that a betrayal of the apparatus of the Skin Ego entails. So, Anzieu, as did Freud, creates a notion of the normally functioning Skin Ego through tracing its necessary "rips" or "betrayals;" and indeed, much of his book is taken up by case studies detailing various Skin Ego disorders. Nevertheless, it is the apparent tension within this concept in Anzieu that actually anticipates most closely another theoretical position offered by Michel Foucault in a reading of Gilles Deleuze.

In "Theatrum Philosophicum" (1977), Foucault lyrically speaks about "extremely thin membranes, which detach themselves from objects and proceed to impose colours and contours" (169). As a contestation of, for example, Anzieu's symptomatology of the borderline case, he states that

this expanding domain of intangible objects ... must be integrated into our thought: we must articulate a philosophy of the phantasm that cannot be reduced to a primordial fact through the intermediary of perception or an image, but that arises between surfaces, where it assumes meaning, and in the reversal that causes every interior to pass to the outside and every exterior to the inside, in the temporal oscillation that always makes it precede and follow itself, in short, in what Deleuze would perhaps not allow us to call its 'incorporeal materiality' (169).

Importantly, these "phantasms do not extend organisms into an imaginary domain; they topologise the materiality of the body" (170). Foucault, in trying to theorise a model of thought that does not take itself as separate from the body, asks us to "imagine a stitched causality: as bodies collide, mingle and suffer, they create events on their surfaces, events

that are without thickness" (173). This passage reveals in more thought-out form the provocative ideas I quoted above from *The History of Sexuality*. What could this stitched causality, as a topologised bodily surface, look like?

Etrange body/porous body: time and video turned inside-out and back around

Shooting so near to the body's surface that recognition falters, the camera's macroscopic lens turns identification inside-out: generates the body as condensation upon an electronic skin.

Dot Tuer, "Perspectives of the Body in Canadian Video Art"

What I want to suggest is that Foucault's surface-theory anticipates video's tendency to chronicle the gaps between concepts, bodies, and inner and outer spaces - and the new connections that form between surfaces in those gaps. This tendency has been described by video and computer critic and artist Christine Tamblyn, who states that

perhaps video now functions as a communitarian medium that fosters the "post-interiority" of the postmodern condition. Video may be instrumental in eradicating the boundaries modernist modes of interiority have erected between subjects. The world of video images and signs is situated directly between directly lived experiences and thought processes. Thus, video efficaciously chronicles the differences that emerge within the body from the repetition of rhythms, gestures, and cycles (27).

So, as I suggested in chapter one, video has historically been webbed to the body, not only by being used consistently in recording the body and rendering it an intelligible object or text, that is, screening the body in; but also, as Tamblyn emphasizes, it has been given great value in video art from early on as an uneasy and enigmatic link between the experiential and the discursive. A better way of saying this is that artists have invaded everyday corporeal acts with the camera, by making the body oscillate between the legible and the illegible, the resolved and the unresolved, the social and the intimate, and the

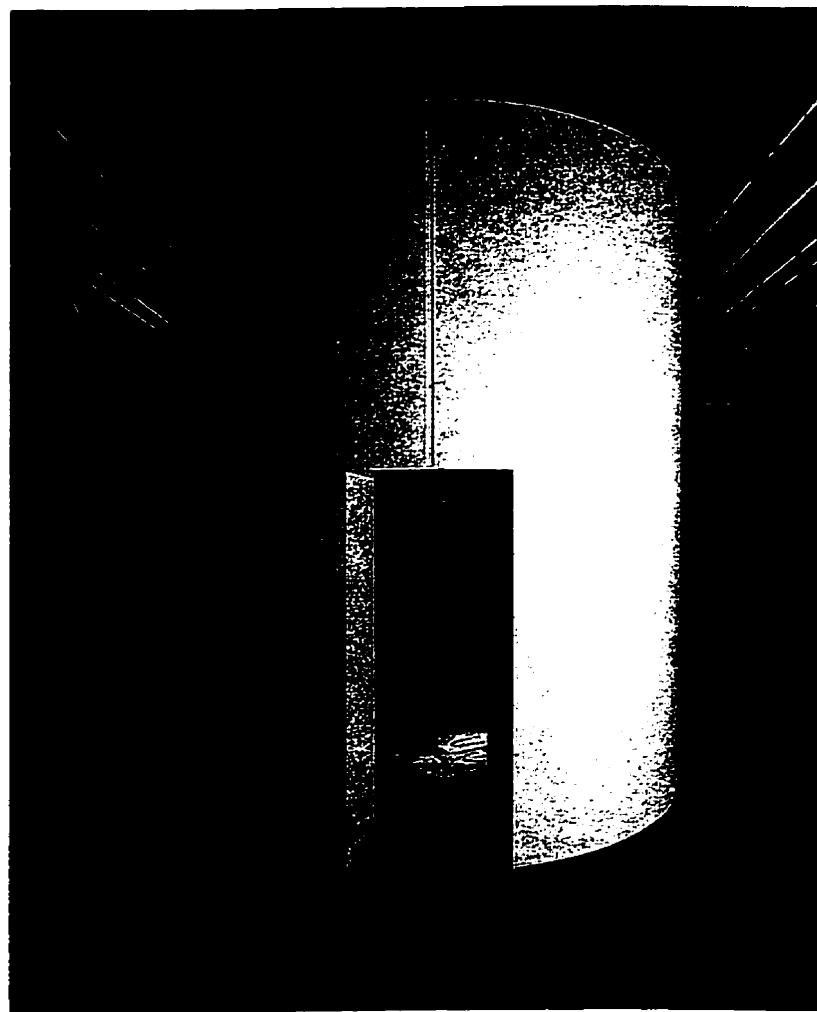
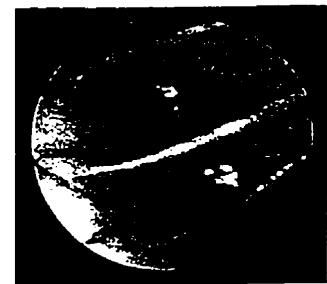
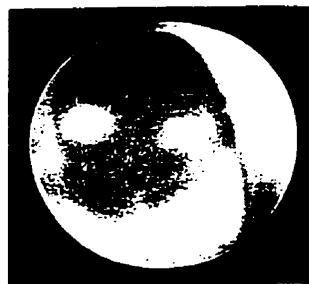


FIGURE 9 Mona Hatoum, *Corps étranger* (video installation), 1994. Courtesy of Philippe Migeat.



FIGURES 10 and 11 Mona Hatoum, *Corps étranger* (video stills), 1994. Courtesy of Jay Jopling.

contained and uncontainable. Thus, in my reading of Mona Hatoum's video piece *Changing Parts*, I indicated the doubling of the screen as a deliberate way of effecting this twofold experience of reading the body of the artist for me as a viewer.

The preoccupation with surface in Foucault's "philosophy of the phantasm," and in Anzieu's concept of the Skin Ego, I would argue, is also analogous to the videographic sensibility displayed in the most recent video installation by Mona Hatoum, called *Corps étranger* (1994). To produce her video for *Corps étranger*, Mona Hatoum underwent endoscopic and coloscopic fibre optic imaging processes. In the installation, this video is screened level with the floor in a small but high circular chamber with two narrow openings for viewers to enter and exit. In particular, touching becomes a theme in this installation, as the viewing chamber creates a constricted viewing space, where the very proximity of the body of the viewer to the screen induces what one viewer has called a sense that "what one sees is relentlessly tactile."⁵⁷ The video and its method of installation thus combine to create a viewing experience that is overwhelming in its sensory invasiveness. The video is filmed in large and distorting scale as the camera journeys along the skin of the artist, entering each orifice as it is encountered, only to reemerge when it can go no further.

In a recent reading of Hatoum's piece, Frances Morris describes it as "exploring the world beneath the flesh," and "pushing our appetite for the fantastic to the limits" (102); however, I would, on the contrary, characterise the piece as turning on the surface of the body as a contradiction, making what is "beneath" or "beyond" the skin more difficult to classify. Where, in fact, does the skin end? This marked opacification of depth takes place at the level of the artist's body: at times, I can see that Hatoum's is a female, brown-skinned and dark-haired body. But the more information the camera gives, the more difficult it is to discern the contours and layerings that demarcate the borders of the body. As the body is turned inside out, it is impossible to know where the

⁵⁷ A comment on the installation made by Elizabeth Harvey.

orifice ends and the skin begins: the limits of seeing are exposed, as the aesthetics of the bodily landscape seem to become abstract. Hatoum uses this process of abstraction to make the video camera turn on itself in front of the viewer, to undo empirical claims tied to the clarity of vision, and succumb to the haptic universe of ill-defined, superficial and ever-changing sensory exchange.

The inside-out experience of the body involves a sense of flattening, in that it confuses rather than clarifies the recognition of one's own, or the other's body. In an interview, Hatoum describes the making of *Corps étranger* as a kind of narcissistic/masochistic double process:

A camera is hooked up to the [coloscopic] mechanism and you actually see yourself on the monitor. I started directing the doctor. I'd say, 'Go in a bit further and do it again,' and he'd say, 'No! Once is enough!' (1994: 13).

Hatoum's is thus an art that is about the insistent birth-performance of a surface being that has the chiasmic structure of penetrator/penetrated. This doubling or opacification structures the formal movement of the camera as well. Frances Morris claims that in Hatoum's earlier work, "the spectator was empowered--often as a voyeur," whereas in this and other later works, "the spectator was entrapped" (103). In my view, it would be more accurate to say that the dichotomy of empowered versus entrapped spectatorship is opened up by the double exposure and confrontation that is enacted by the video: while the viewer is invaded by the shocking imagery of the inside of Hatoum's body, that unimaginably physical and private space, Hatoum's body is seemingly demystified and flayed open, exposed. But the source of the gaze is inverted when the screen passes over the eye of the artist. Because of its round and convex shape, the screen momentarily becomes a seeing eye. So, each movement of invasion is bi-directional. I do not want to posit a falsely harmonious reciprocity, but rather regard the positionalities of object and subject of the gaze in *Corps étranger* as thoroughly destabilized through the movement of unveiling and covering the screen/skin.

And in fact, the video screen is not able to divulge the secrets of what constitutes the inside of the body, neither by differentiating it from the skin, nor by differentiating various orifices. Rather, the screen/eye is duplicitous and confuses the nostril, the anus, the nipple and the navel. The piece thus comments on the notion that as the greatest metaphor for scientific discovery, the camera stands apart in its capacity to image incogitable parts of the human body. The tools of coloscopic and endoscopic imaging are already deployed within Western medical science, which largely preoccupy themselves with abjecting the sick, female, and racially and age-marked body. In Hatoum's work then, the promise of real-time documentation proves false as the camera's touching and penetration of the body obfuscates, aestheticises and redirects itself, canelling the presumed goal of the imaging process. The architectural part of the installation gives this ambiguity another dimension, acting at once as a cavernous, dark, womb-like container, and an isolating, insulating cage.

Furthermore, as critic Jessica Morgan contends, "the potential ambivalence of the reading extends to the very title of the piece. For *Corps étranger* is both a 'foreign body' that must apparently somehow be purged and, implicitly, the body of a stranger" (Cameron and Morgan 4). So, the double meaning of *étranger* in this case points to the sudden interchangability of viewer and viewed, as along with Hatoum, the viewer experiences the externalisation of the inside of the body as a becoming-strange of her own body. In the context of this experience, Kaja Silverman has said that seeing oneself imaged is painful for everyone because "what is determinative for each of us is not how we see or would like to see ourselves, but how we are perceived by the cultural gaze" (1996: 19). But the video also serves as a metaphorisation of the experience of racial norms in the West, in light of the continued legal, social, and economic repression of groups whose racially marked bodies present an insistent difference at the level of seeing. On this particular issue, Silverman goes on to say that since, in Western societies, "the imposition of...forms of difference depends upon the imaginary alignment of certain

subjects with what is negative rather than ideal, the images through which the subject is culturally apprehended do not always facilitate the production of a loveable body ego" (1996: 19).

Another way of saying this is that what we encounter in *Corps étranger* is a video artist's struggle to understand how, with certain operations, video can be used against itself, in order to engage the contemporary problem in media-colonized Western society of "the relative fusion/confusion of the factual...and the virtual; the ascendancy of the 'reality effect' over a reality principle already largely contested in physics" (Virilio 1994: 60). Moreover, the (de)figuration enacted by this work illustrates that around a reconception of the body forms an apposite region of videographic agency, because

that body without orifices - without pores or holes where smells and noises emerge - is a visual body, and it is in the audiovisual that it must be made porous again. Video disassembles the ontological pretence of the image (its pretence to presence) by creating a porous and extensible time out of what otherwise is constructed as the irrefragible instant of sight (202).

In Hatoum's piece, otherness is signalled through drawing attention to the electrified and luminous - temporally ever-changing - screen . This aspect is reinforced by the fact that the screen itself functions as a sensory juncture, paralleling the surface-body: it draws the viewer in to its superficiality with its loud and sound-track (Hatoum's breathing layered with her heartbeat) and its electronic vibrations (high-pitched sound and tactile vibrations). Through her dissident use of the camera and the installation structure, Hatoum allows the constantly inverting experience of the skin/screen to be separated from a reified body (a limb as part of a whole, touching or seeing as a prefiguring of knowing). *Corps étranger* can be described as a constant operation of fragments of an image coming in and out of resolution, neither abstract nor figurative, or both at once.

Mona Hatoum's piece, and Rebecca Brown's stories, as I will suggest shortly, show that such concentrated use of the camera as touching the surface-body can help us

question the borders between the material or formal aspects of representations, and their ability to tell us something about our experience. The questioning of "figuration" conceived of as a juncture of the surface body and metonymic language - Foucault's "philosophy of the phantasm" - also justifies a tearing down of the borders between poetry, fiction and visual art. Here, we are crossing some of the same territory that Benjamin helped us negotiate in chapter two, when he equates the work of art with the process of translation in order to show its ethical presentation of difference. When comparing the imagistic quality of both works, I hope it will become clear that Hatoum and Brown import strategies from each other. Let me postulate that the relation between the tactile surface-body and the video/literary image is analogous to the relation between the original and the translation: images never replace touching, nor is touching more fundamental or primitive than seeing; and neither can lead to the absolute or pure representation of the body, the past, or the Other as such. The layered use of tactility and seeing shows how each sense frames the other, making it possible to historicise each one in turn.

The breakable container: surface experience in the lesbian body allegory

In the context of Brown's *The Terrible Girls*, I want to return briefly to Anzieu's work. As I explained above, the experience of the skin as a container conditions selfhood, or better put, the exteriorisation of part of oneself is necessary in order to be able to "have" a self. A crucial part of Anzieu's conclusion of his work on the Skin Ego, speaking about its importance for his clinical practice, is that he learned through his patients' struggles to come to grips with the significance of their skin, that "the spoken word, and even more, the written word, has the power to *function as a skin*" (231, [my emphasis]). By extension, on my reading, these works by Hatoum and Brown show that the precise

recognition of a body through the separation of the skin and phantasm does not, in fact, condition political and social change.

The Terrible Girls offers stories of bodily experience and desire that don't remain indifferent to the patriarchal and heterosexist subjectivating power, but which nonetheless allegorise the way in which surface-experiences and phantasmatic identifications are already crossed and contaminated by each other. This transgression is embodied by lesbian phantasy and sexual contact. I want to point to Brown's novel as a work that both stretches and displaces Anzieu's psychoanalytic definition of the Skin Ego, and that re-writes its (lack of) place within "lesbian desire" as well. Going along with Butler in her theorisation of the lesbian phallus, I see this re-writing as a poetic strategy that can provide the basis for a sustained political critique. The "violence" of the various bodily acts, along with the constantly shifting and failing identifications in Brown's stories speak simultaneously about the framing of human desire, when they allegorise and diversify the bodily touching as both inside (fantasy and the compulsion to repeat) and outside (political objection/rage/punishment).⁵⁸

In *The Terrible Girls*, the action, the emotional investments, the journeys and the everyday routines of the characters are narrated in terms of coming to grips with a body-surface or a body part that is ambiguously but repeatedly exchanged, lost, transferred or buried. The body and its limbs, especially the skin and the hands, are not simply psychically invested; indeed, they *stand in* for the psyche. Each "terrible girl" story is narrated in first person, giving an embodied feel to the voice/hand that is telling/writing the tale. This sense of embodiment is subsequently problematised as the reader

⁵⁸ The violence of the imagery in *The Terrible Girls* is quite striking. I have decided to subsume all kinds of bodily "contact" under "touching" because the issue of violence is too complex to deal with well here. However, I do not mean to suggest that there are not different kinds of such contact, more or less traumatic to the body-border-experience. Note that I do feel that the kind of violence metaphorised in *The Terrible Girls* which for me displaces the distinction between body and psyche is of the same order as consensual taboo sex practices (S/M, body-piercing, etc). It is thus radically disjunct from the kind of violence that queers, women and children encounter in their homes and on the streets. The former kind of poetic violence unmasks the public inscrutability of the female and queer body, while the latter relies on that same inscrutability in order to go undetected.

encounters the allegorical dismembering and re-membering of the characters' skins and extremities. In the first story, "The Dark House," the hand of the desired woman repeatedly comes to represent the narrator/protagonist's desires; that is, it becomes the interface of her own and the other's desires. The desired woman's wishes are perceived by the narrator as an acting hand: "You spoke to me...with hands and tongue and teeth and with...your mouth," (6) "the hands came off my mouth and I could see who had abducted me: you," (7) and "you dropped your hands to your sides. I looked at them" (7). Furthermore, the protagonist/narrator speaks of her lover's body part as if she has created it as a phantasmatic subject. In the following passages from "The Dark House," these fantasies emerge as repetitive and compensatory in nature:

But I told myself that you had waved...It was so lovely what I saw, and so much what I wanted, that I closed my eyes between the floors and saw the sight of your hand waving in to me (8).

Though I couldn't see, I pretended I could, the back of your head, and it turned around and looked at me (15).

I close my eyes and imagine your hand waving out to me (24).

In "What I Did," a bag is ritually installed as an appendage that is a condition for survival. The bag is explicitly hypostatised as a body, its surface equated with skin: "I felt the skin of the bag on the skin of my back through my shirt," and "the skin of the bag was tough" (102). The bag, as an exteriorised surface-body, or sac, to use Anzieu's term, is experienced as a liability in "real" life: "my job was to carry the bag and I did my work hard" but "I would have been relieved to stop carrying the bag" (104-5). However, the bag is also eroticised as an object that can provide satisfaction in fantasy, becoming orgasmic precisely at the moment of border-experience:

But this time when I rested, how I dreamt of my bag! I dreamt that I was walking and I didn't have the weight on me and I was on a different path...Then there was a hand, and the hand was pointing and I saw the

bag. I kneeled on the moist ground...and slowly, slowly put my hand around the bag. The bag was warm. The bag was soft as skin. Then easily, so easily, the bag opened itself to me...the skin slipped apart like oil, it opened like a bud and there was a sweet, clean smell like a blessed thing, like a thing released (107).

Apparently, then, the bag figures both the pleasure of exteriorising the skin, and the experience of touching the skin of the other. Thus, this metaphorisation of the bag defies the dichotomous structure whereby one is either touching or touched, penetrator or penetrated, and pleasured or pained, taking on the chiasmatic structure of Hatoum's *Corps étranger*. It also questions the neat distinction that Anzieu draws between masochistic and normal subjectivity, as well as between healthy and unhealthy versions of the Skin Ego.

The extremes of this fictional combination of lesbian phantasms and body betrayals are narrated in "Junk Mail." In this story, again, each step of a love movement is described in terms of the body and its (dis)membering. In some instances, the narrator describes her phantasmatic self-image as disembodied, or at least as minimally embodied: "I imagine myself a bird. I imagine myself in the belly of a plane;" "I'm thin and lithe and cool and dry and sharp;" (39) and "I see myself. I'm floating above it like a silent, separate eye, no form or body...I'm the little shape I see below me, so tiny and sharp" (41). Yet, the alternate extreme of the touch of a lover lies in the following experience of total dissolution, and its obverse, total embodiment. Neither wholeness nor detachment are means of escape; rather, this bodily phantasm repeats the relentless vacillation between a tightening (suffocating) skin and a dissolved (exploded) one:

I'll send me back to you, my love...It isn't just an ordinary box I'm in, but I don't notice this until I wake up in your tender arms again...I'm curled up inside this tiny box...and you're winding me up, turning a crank in my back...And every crank you turn gets me wound up tighter...My skin tightens, about to pop...My neck is arcing down into my chest. My bent arms squash into my ribs...When the crank is wound so tight that even you can't crank it any more, when I'm so tight and doubled over, about to burst, that's when we both breath a breath that's just alike. We hold it,

then--pop!--I spew out from the lid, my arms shot apart like unconnected sleeves, little red bits of my fingers splatter like pimentos on the ceiling, my ribs cracked sideways, my torso gouged, my face split like a curtain (39-40).

In this passage, the metaphorisation of love and touch as betrayals of the discreteness of body-borders is particularly explicit. The failure of skin this time is to not adequately demarcate between the two lovers. In the above passage, the moment of *desire* is fulfilled when the narrator is in pieces, "in [her lover's] tender arms again;" whereas the moment of *identification* - "we both breathe a breath that is exactly alike" - occurs when she is on the verge of going to pieces, "doubled over." The "doubling," "arcing," "squashing" and "crushing" of this posture reinforces the idea that this doubled experience of the surface-body and phantasmatic identification is both a hiding and an unveiling, a pleasure and a pain. Recalling Butler's argument about the lesbian phallus, *The Terrible Girls* focuses on being able to think of touching the skin as the vacillation between the phantasmatic and the bodily. For if the intactness of the Skin Ego is the condition of culture, then Brown's body allegory displaces its very power to condition, displaying the complex patterns of (dis)embodiment through which we all face each other differently as surface-bodies.

Conclusion

The topology explored in both Hatoum's and Brown's works is an invasive optic and haptic bodily map, lacking borders, bleeding corporeality into its margins. But both deconstructive approaches to the body disavow the body as a deep container available only to relay sensory perception. Instead, they proliferate experiences of the surface. Christine Ross, citing Georges Didi-Huberman, has argued that with video, and I would add here, the insistent body-metaphor at play in a novel such as *The Terrible Girls*, we need to think the "image (which could only be) of the surface," as that which "invites the

gaze to slip," and "would therefore have as its cause and its effect the suspension, the negation, the opacification of that which has depth." Conceived of in this way, then, the image "engulfs that which is deep and becomes, by a kind of dichotomous inversion, depth as such" (1995: 131). This inversion has important consequences, for, "the video image is therefore the site of a renewal of the surface's relation with itself,...the addition, piling up, and extension of surfaces" (1995: 132). More precisely, the dichotomy of surface and depth (form and content) is transformed by my theorisation of touch, insofar as "touching" can create an opacification of the "reaching in," "diving down" and "raising up" of content beyond form. Indeed, it can block the hyperbolics where form, through molding matter into something intelligible, finally yields to content. This opacification of the modern experience through the flattening of the hierarchy of form and content has been described by Gilles Deleuze using the image of the rising and flattening ground:

The Platonists used to say that the not-One distinguished itself from the One, but not the converse, since the One does not flee that which flees it; and at the other pole, form distinguishes itself from matter or from the ground, but not the converse, since distinction itself is a form. [But] in truth, all the forms are dissolved when they are reflected in this rising ground. It has ceased to be the pure indeterminate which remains below, but the forms also cease to be the coexisting or complementary determinations. The rising ground is no longer below, it acquires autonomous existence; the form reflected in this ground is no longer form but an abstract line acting directly upon the soul.

Even if it is moving, a fully resolved (figurative) image, one in which framing and "touching" devices are invisible, is frozen in time. In the context of Hatoum's and Brown's work, this non-temporal image is broken because touch is to seeing, as frame is to the image: a condition of its operation, but also, that which can point to its limit, pointing outside its own bordering position. These works trace the links between touching and framing, both suspending the recapitulation of a frozen image. Articulating the problem of representation in this way makes it possible to conceive of these radical body-allegories as being linked through the movement, or change in their form. Each

uses the surface to deflect questions of identity and reproduction toward questions of address and staging. Rather than identifying a body by touching its surface (obtaining depth through the markers on the surface), they enact the ongoing politicisation of the movement of touching by showing how the juncture of the skin, the image and language is anything but easy to experience or re-present, though the attempt to do so must not be given up.

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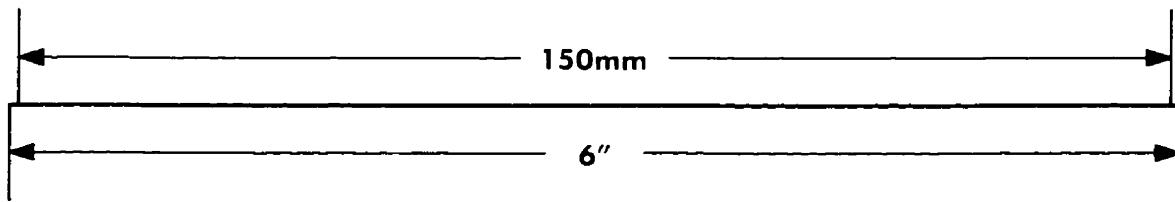
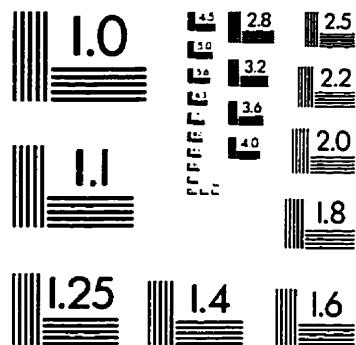
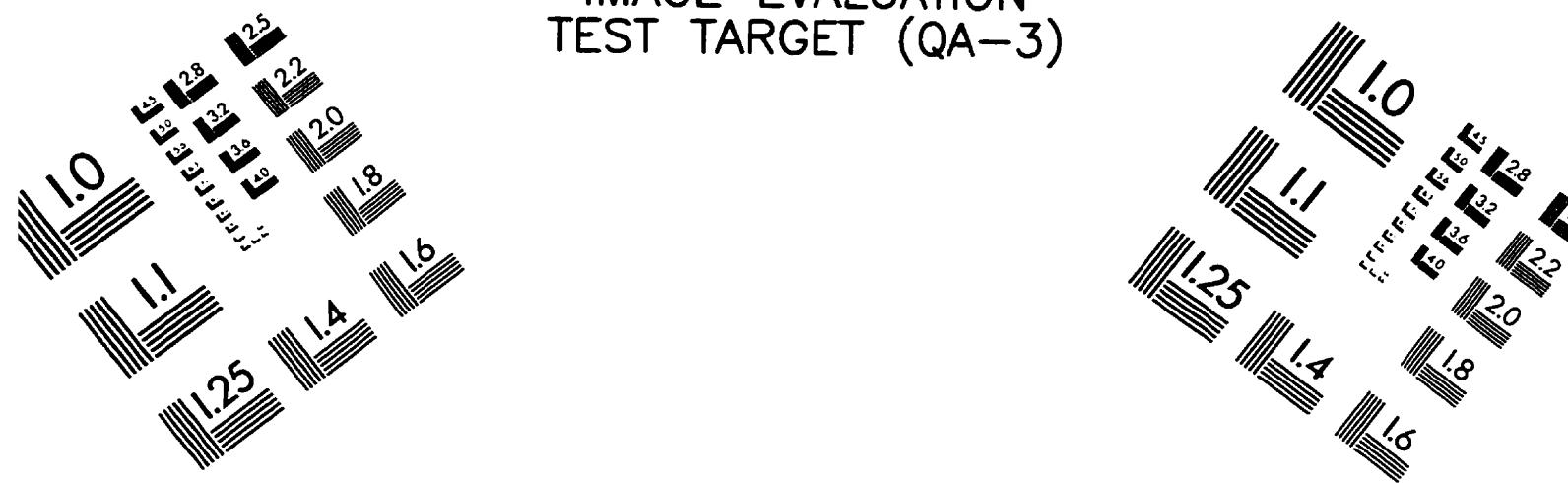
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