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No Innocent Bystanders: Performance Art and Audience

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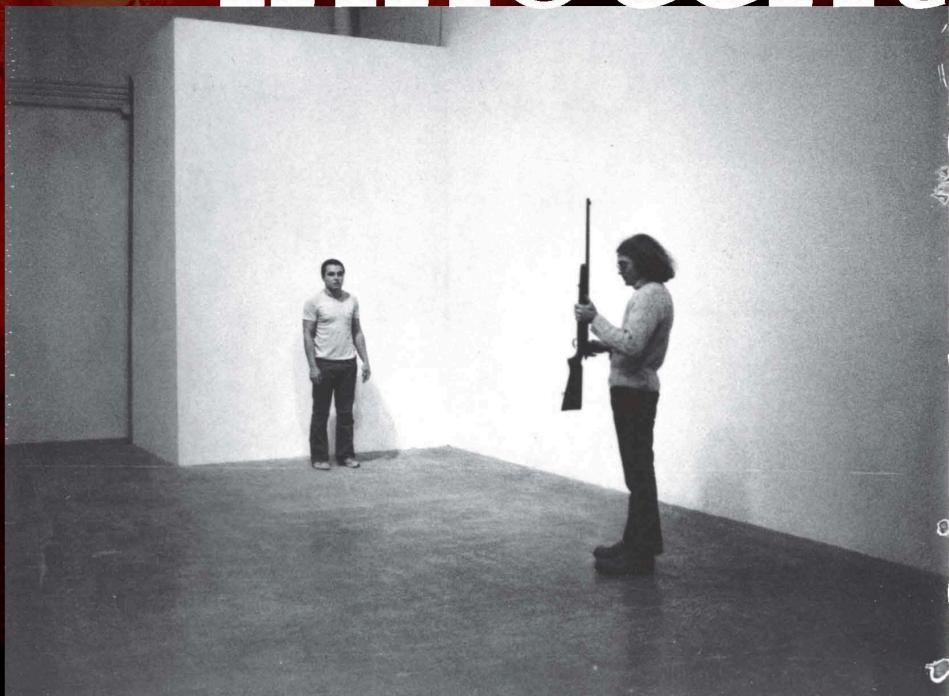
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Performance Art and
Audience •

No innocent

BYSTANDERS



FRAZER WARD

NO INNOCENT
BYSTANDERS

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No Innocent

Bystanders

PERFORMANCE ART AND AUDIENCE

Frazer Ward

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..... For Alex

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NO INNOCENT

BYSTANDERS

Introduction

REIMAGINING THE AUDIENCE



CHRIS BURDEN

Shoot

November 19, 1971

#8

If you leave decisions to the public, you can be killed.

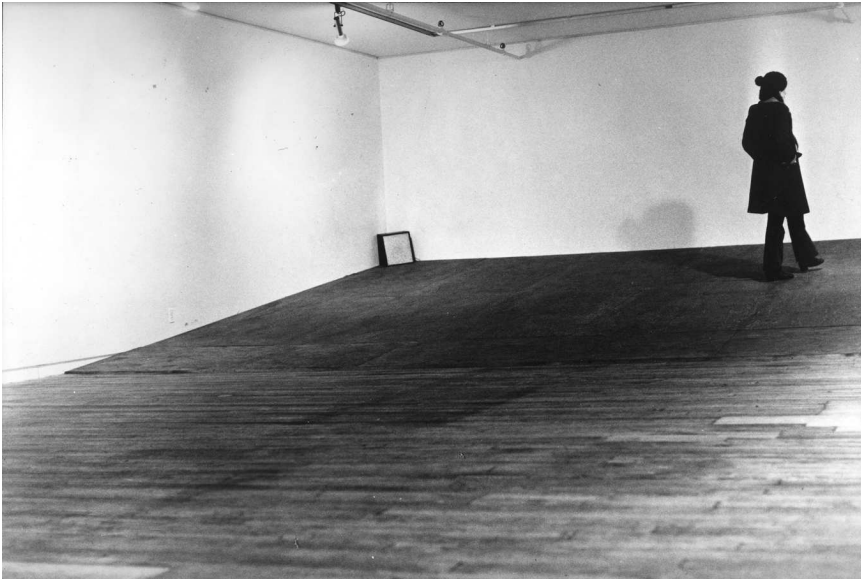
..... MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ¹

A man arranges to be shot in the arm by his friend. Another man masturbates under the floor of a public space, narrating his fantasies aloud as he goes. A woman lays a series of objects out on a table—among them soap, feathers, chain, and gun—and says she is to be treated as an object too. An illegal alien forbidden to work punches a time clock, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for one year. These are descriptions of Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971), Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974), and Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance 1980–1981 (Time Clock Piece)*. Whether or not it was a legitimate insight, in 1971, to see a work like *Shoot* as the result of a logic of escalating extremity at work within avant-garde circles,² these works have nevertheless outlasted their initial moment: *Shoot* and *Seedbed*, in particular, have become icons of the 1970s heyday of experimental and frequently confrontational performance art (their iconic status somewhat ironic, given performance art's undermining of the primacy of visual experience for art). Clearly, these events, even described somewhat abstractly, remain challenging in their physical and/or psychological extremity and intensity. But what might otherwise, free of context, be understood as mundane violence or pathological behavior has been legitimated by its framing as art. These events have remained compelling not only because they set new parameters for risk, the breaking of taboos, or sheer duration, but also because, set in the context of art, they established an interplay between what happened, described in general terms—a man was shot, a man masturbated in (semi-)public, a woman subjected herself to the whims of a group of strangers, a man undertook to repeat an action according to a schedule so rigorous it controlled his life—and what happened, considered as art. The importance of art as a context here is that it at once invokes and relies upon (even as it may capture) an

(previous page)

Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971.

© Chris Burden. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery



Vito Acconci, *Seedbed*, 1972.

© Acconci Studio. Photo: Bernadette Meyer

audience. How these performances reimagined their audiences is the focus of this book.

The works central to this book are Acconci's *Claim* (1971) and his notorious masturbation piece, *Seedbed* (1972); Burden's *Five Day Locker Piece* and *Shoot*, both in 1971; the five performances that constitute Abramović's *Rhythm* series (1973–1974), and her *Thomas' Lips* (1975, and reperformed in 2005); Hsieh's five *One Year Performances* (1978–1986), and his final work, *Tehching Hsieh 1986–1999*.³ These retain contemporary relevance because they pose questions in such challenging terms about how art imagines its audiences, and the possibilities of their transformation. Is it all right to stand by and watch someone be shot? When is it appropriate to involve complete strangers in your sexual fantasies? What to do when a woman offers herself to you as an object? Can there be any art when the artist keeps that art secret?

Acconci, Burden, Abramović, and Hsieh exemplify the performance art that provides the most striking instances of the shift away from object-based practices in the wake of the sixties. While performance

art and its histories have often taken subjectivity as an important concern (one that is discussed in this book), performance art has also, just as importantly, modeled new constructions of its audiences: these can be seen in relation to the categories of public and community, in particular. In my view, subjectivity is intimately bound to these constructions of the audience, so this book examines a double trajectory. Performance art is seen to arc from explicitly post-minimalist explorations of the idea of the public in works by Acconci and Burden, through the generation of aversive models of community in works by Burden and Abramović, to the virtual abandonment of the audience by Hsieh. At the same time, this arc of performance interprets a historical and theoretical shift, in which the possibility of envisaging critical artistic engagement with the democratic potential of the public sphere or of publicness, seen in a broadly Habermasian sense, fractures and gives way to unstable reliance on smaller-scale group formations. These formations are able to be categorized under “community,” as that concept is redefined in the work of theorists engaged in the attempt to think through rationality in post-Enlightenment contexts (here, principally Giorgio Agamben and Jean-Luc Nancy). In this double trajectory, the performance art reveals the historical exclusions and the theoretical idealizations that undermine the categories of public and community. In each case, whether it be Acconci and Burden laying bare the fiction of the public/private split, Burden and Abramović exposing the limitations of community, or Hsieh all but obliterating the line between artist and audience, the modeling of the audience in the work of these artists rests on an ethical imperative: in different ways, they ask what behavior we will tolerate in the name of art—and, by extension, what we will tolerate in what other names. The unforgiving implication of their work is that there are no innocent bystanders.

The double trajectory borrows something from Hal Foster’s “parallax view” of history,⁴ broadly because it represents a view of works from the seventies (with roots in the sixties) that tells us something about the artists’ seventies and our imaginary seventies, but only at the same time as it tells us something about our present moment. More specifically, the rearticulation of terms like public and community, as they are bound up with the protest culture of the sixties and seventies, speaks to the shifting imagination and understanding of that culture,

and its implications for the politics of a more heavily mediated contemporary culture. A concern of this book is the relations between performance art practices and protest and media cultures. As such, the historical and theoretical arc of the book is subtended by a (necessarily) critical reading of Jürgen Habermas's account of the public sphere, an account that emerged initially in 1962 and which sees publicness as bound to forms of mediation.⁵

It is necessary, here, to rehearse some centrally pertinent aspects of Habermas's work because his account of the public sphere—with its shortcomings—provides a framework in which to comprehend the minimalist version of publicness. Minimalism, with its implications for the changed role of the viewer, was the departure point for Accinci's and Burden's work in particular, and their critique of minimalism opens the way for performance art's interrogation of the public sphere and, in turn, community. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas described the bourgeois public sphere, essentially, as an environment for discourse that operated *between* what are conventionally considered public and private realms (and between the private realm and the state) in which, ideally, citizens laid aside social difference in the exercise of critical reason, and where the rules governing “the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor”⁶ would be established in rational-critical debate. The bourgeois, Enlightenment subject of this debate emerged in the eighteenth century from a private realm in which it rehearsed itself in discussions about new print media, including the novel, and as such was not only bound to new forms of mediation but also to an audience: “The public's understanding of the public use of reason was guided specifically by such private experiences as grew out of the audience-oriented (*publikumsbezogen*) subjectivity of the conjugal family's intimate domain (*Intimsphäre*).”⁷ Habermas's account is formal and abstract to the extent that it is in part an idealization for heuristic purposes. By now, it almost goes without saying that Habermas's specifically bourgeois public sphere was constituted by its exclusions of women and of the proletarian public sphere, and more generally downplayed the conflictual aspects of democratic social organization (real or imagined).⁸ Clearly, Habermas's classic text offers an imperfect historical account. Even so, with—and probably because of—its prob-

lems, it remains a foundational instance in terms of attempting to think through the possibilities of a democratic, rational discourse environment independent of social difference. One might argue that the difficulties that beset Habermas's argument (the various structuring exclusions) demonstrate, in turn, the difficulty of identifying and extracting a view of any such environment at all from the historical onrush of the processes of cultural commodification that had made the public use of reason possible (or possible to imagine) in the first place: "When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unraveled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode."⁹ Or, as Terry Eagleton has glossed it: "The very material conditions which bring modern criticism into existence . . . are the conditions which, in developed form, will spell its demise."¹⁰

Habermas's story of the emergence of the public sphere on the back of the commodification of media forms, and the subsequent narrowing of the possibilities of publicness with the relentless expansion of the same processes of commodification, appeared in a still-repressive post-World War II Germany.¹¹ At the same moment—the early sixties—in a more optimistic United States, Robert Morris and other artists, including Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, and Donald Judd, were producing some of the earliest works that would come to be identified with minimalism. Morris's *Untitled (Cloud)* and *Untitled (Slab)*, both of 1962, articulate the new, public space of minimalism. In "Notes on Sculpture, Part II," in 1966, Morris would argue that the large scale of the objects, in comparison with the viewer's body size, established a necessarily greater viewing distance that structured "the non-personal or public mode" of the work.¹² This is the famous moment in which the object became "but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic," and the viewer took on the task of "establishing relationships" as he [*sic*] apprehended the object "from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context."¹³ This would prove to be a crucial point of departure for performance artists as it established the experience of art as both public and embodied. It is important to understand here that the two versions of publicness, one

social-theoretical and bourgeois, the other aesthetic and minimalist, share a quality of abstraction. Both Habermas's and Morris's schemes are essentially procedural, performing series of exclusions to produce purportedly democratic, public situations in which the citizen brings reason to the table, the art viewer brings meaning to the work of art.

In both cases, this public situation depends upon a distinction between public and private realms. For Habermas, it is the penetration of privacy by the market that ultimately transforms the public sphere: the bourgeois public sphere requires that privacy remain intact so that the public sphere can form *between* the private domain and the realms dominated by market forces. Morris lays out quite clear and categorical distinctions between private and public modes of experience. A full account of the role of privacy in minimalism—and its importance for performance art—is the subject of the following chapter, but looking toward that discussion, it is striking that technology guru Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* first appeared in 1964, the same year as Morris's important exhibition at the Green Gallery, New York. McLuhan shares with Habermas a vision of mass media informed by extrapolation from the historical emergence of print media,¹⁴ but in *Understanding Media* would reach very different conclusions. In that popular book, McLuhan saw subjectivity as prosthetically continuous with mass media: "During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system in a global embrace."¹⁵ Not only was any distinction between public and private realms necessarily eliminated, but the body was also subject to mediation, and no longer served as the ground for any "authentically" private experience. To invoke McLuhan here is to suggest that minimalism emerged when the effects of mass media on the formation of subjectivity were available for consideration in relatively accessible forms, and certainly for an audience extending far beyond the art world. Of course, there was also already a long Marxist tradition in place, in which relations between people were intimately tied to relations between commodities—things—that undermined the possibility of a purely private or autonomous subjectivity.

By the mid-sixties, therefore, it was clearly possible to see that mass

media, and concomitantly the processes of commodification, affected the structures of family, domestic or private life in which any supposedly distinct private interiority must be formed. This meant that minimalism could not irrevocably establish an understanding of subjectivity and meaning as public, because the diffusion of mass media through interiors and exteriors meant that the distinction between public and private had become fictional or ideological (if it had not always already been so). And, in fact, this is implicit even in Habermas's programmatic account of the social structures of the eighteenth-century European public sphere: "The fully developed bourgeois public sphere was based on the *fictitious identity* of the two roles assumed by the *privatized* individuals who came together to form a public: the *role* of property owners and the *role* of human beings pure and simple."¹⁶ The audience-oriented subject that emerged from the private realm was always already performative, a necessary fiction that spanned the transition from private salon to public space. The ethical imperative of performance art is often developed in transitional zones where distinctions between public and private provide little guidance.

Performance artists like Acconci and Burden undertook their own, albeit unsystematic, analyses of the abstraction of minimalist space and minimalist versions of publicness. Putting warm, wounded, needy, desiring, talking, or maddeningly passive bodies into versions of minimalist space had the effect of undermining the public/private distinction upon which the idealized public sphere depends. It also introduced affective elements that had been eliminated from rational (or rationalist), Habermasian and minimalist public spheres. In coming to terms with their work, after the fact, this allows for a bridge from the idea of a public sphere defined by disinterest, to the idea of community as a group formation defined by affect and interest, by something shared, by an experience or a purpose giving body and shape to a group—or, one might say, to a democratic or potentially democratic social formation, not bound to a normative, Enlightenment account of rationality. Both ideas, it should be noted, resonate with an understanding of the participatory aspects of the protest culture of the sixties and seventies. Perhaps because community seems to address shortcomings in the theorization of the public sphere, it might then seem like a promising aspect of protest culture to emphasize in looking

for a telling context for art from the period (“art and community,” as against “art in the public sphere”). Yet there is an extant critique of community as an idea that is grounded in nostalgia for essentially pre-urban forms of social organization, and as an idea that is essentially exclusive (in, or out; with us, or against us).¹⁷ (Ironic that the affective utopia of community should be structured, just like the public sphere, by exclusion.) The desire to retain from community the value of the common, the communal, has generated—in philosophical work by Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben—a philosophical examination of community in which community occurs not as historical fact but as potentiality or limit.¹⁸ Burden and Abramović, putting their bodies under duress for audiences (even at the hands of audiences), would play on the exclusivity of community to great effect, as if to invoke community-as-limit. In doing so, they reveal the violence underlying both the public and community. The figure of pre-Enlightenment Roman law that Agamben resurrects, *homo sacer*, the “sacred man” whom anyone can kill but who cannot be ritually sacrificed, provides a model in relation to which the work of Abramović and Hsieh, in particular, can be comprehended (as I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5).¹⁹ This figure points to the violence upon which juridical order depends—and therefore ultimately any functioning public sphere—and its character as simultaneously inside and outside social formation speaks to the founding exclusions of community, as conventionally understood.

While the literature on performance art might talk about witnessing, it has been more concerned with constructions of subjectivity than with constructions of the audience.²⁰ The specifically art-historical reception of performance art circles three main elements: presence, the activation of the viewer, and duration. With regard to presence, performance art is seen either in opposition to or as a continuation of modernist artistic subjectivity. There is a response to performance art that says, in a positive mode, that performance art instantiates the subject as radically embodied. This is usually posited against modernist opticality, and presents an alternative ground of authenticity, guaranteed by the very presence of the artist (and, very occasionally, in the you-had-to-be-there version, by the presence of the audience, as witnesses).²¹ This argument for presence is double-sided, however: in its inverse, negative mode, it sees performance as the reinstantiation of a specifically

modernist (and bad) presence by other means (that is, the presence that leads from the mark on the canvas as the record of a painterly gesture, back up the brush to the hand and from there to the psyche).²² On either side, the argument for presence tends to treat that presence too straightforwardly, as though it were self-evident.

It might seem, for instance, as though Acconci had simply been right there, masturbating under the ramp constructed in the gallery for *Seedbed* (soliciting intersubjective exchanges, as one critic has it²³), or as though Chris Burden's experience in *Five Day Locker Piece*—a work in which the artist was locked into a standard book locker for five days and nights—had been self-explanatory. In fact even the initial audience's experience of the bodies in question was in crucial ways distanced and required explanation (which is to say that the bodies *were* in question). Both artists *told* their audiences what they were doing, Acconci by means of a simple public address system, microphone and speaker, Burden by speaking to "viewers" through the small grille in the locker door. In these and other examples the presence of the artist's body emerged through interactions with and between audience members. And of course our experience, after the fact, is highly mediated: if part of the initial experience was to encounter a ramp and, essentially, a box (the locker), now we have a photograph of a ramp, a photograph of a box. Such distancing and mediation is centrally characteristic of much performance art and suggests that presence is not straightforward, and that the body is not a given. It follows that the body provides an uncertain guarantee of experience. Subjectivity is certainly an issue in relation to these works. But it is important as an issue of, an effect of, the nature of the distanced exchanges that took place between audience members and the performance (and which continue to take place). The models of subjectivity that emerge from these works are preceded by and dependent upon audience effects, the ways in which the works model their audiences.

We have frequently been told that performance art is important because it "activated the viewer" in ways that were purportedly democratic, that viewer being otherwise apparently in thrall to modernist passivity.²⁴ This proposal carries a distinct echo of—or, perhaps, aspiration to—the protest culture of the sixties. Historians and critics ally

performance art with radical politics,²⁵ perhaps most broadly because the deployment of the body in art—especially art whose makers came of age in the sixties—finds its political analogy in putting bodies on the street in demonstrations (the model provided by the 1960s typically being demonstrations against the Vietnam War). The artists themselves, explicitly or implicitly, both through their work and in their own commentaries, do stage relations to protest culture, but these provide a rather more complex and even critical gloss on ideas of public space and community, on which protest culture often rests. In *Claim*, which was staged just as inmates of Attica State Penitentiary in upstate New York were taking over the prison, Acconci would barricade himself into a small space and apparently talk himself into defending it violently.²⁶ Burden's *Shoot* has to be seen against the backdrop of the Vietnam War.²⁷ And Burden would remark, with what might have been both withering and blank irony, that being shot “was as American as apple pie.”²⁸ Abramović's *Rhythm 5* (1974)—in which she lay down inside a five-pointed star marked out on the ground by a wooden frame containing wood chips soaked in petrol and set on fire—is iconographically a Yugoslav flag-burning, one that she had to be rescued from (this necessity was unplanned, but also metaphorically rich). Reflecting on his performance work, Acconci would later speak of the lure of the street, and of the “real,” but would complicate that desire by seeing the real, exemplified in the demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, through the lens of Haskell Wexler's semi-documentary film *Medium Cool* (1969).²⁹ In that film, shot amid demonstrations and official counter-demonstrations, the real and the fictional became difficult for the filmmakers themselves to distinguish. Later still, having moved into the current phase of his career as a designer of public spaces, Acconci would say: “Maybe I work in a state of shock at having my assumptions about public space, assumptions that were formed in the 60s, knocked out of me. I keep crying wolf: ‘Public space is where the revolution happens!’ But I’ve been numbed, and I don’t believe anymore.”³⁰

This is to suggest that performance art's relation to protest culture is ambivalent. On one hand, the work of the artists discussed here clearly draws on the complex legacy of the sixties, insofar as it explores the democratizing potential of participatory culture, and seems to be

driven by what might be seen as a counter-cultural desire to undermine taboos. On the other hand, though, it is central to the works under discussion that they are implicitly or explicitly critical of group formations like public or community, upon which participatory culture seems to depend (a disquiet explored in the chapters that follow on individual artists). Consequently, the activation of the viewer has to be seen as an equally ambivalent process: the viewer of performance was often sorely manipulated, or else given untenable choices. (Watch *this*, say Chris Burden and Marina Abramović, or, go on, hurt me.)

Unlike minimalism's phenomenological "the viewer," who has, by contrast, been thoroughly critiqued as an abstraction that is not, in fact, value-free,³¹ the viewer of performance has typically remained a relatively unexamined, single figure. The standard representation of Acconci's *Seedbed* shows a single, female viewer on the ramp. Richard Serra, in acknowledging Acconci, along with Dennis Oppenheim, as one of the key figures whom "everyone looked at" at that moment, said that there were often many people on the ramp.³² Even just to emphasize that would change the standard critical response to the work quite significantly, insofar as it complicates interactions between Acconci and "the viewer" but also implies interactions between or among viewers.

Most importantly, with regard to the role of the viewer, performance typically exists in terms of a doubleness of experience that was clearly anticipated by its practitioners. This tends to attenuate the experience of initial audiences. Burden has referred to "primary" audiences as the people who were there, and "secondary" audiences as the people who would read about it later.³³ Most performance artists were very precise about exactly how their work was documented; one's relation to it after the fact is always posited in relation to the imagined experience of the audience who was there, or more precisely, one imagines oneself in the situation, but invariably on the basis of inadequate information. This remains so, even in the case of people remembering performances they themselves attended (and there is a study to be done on the misremembering of performance). So performance, with its documentation, projects a virtual audience (or public, or community), across time. Abramović brilliantly expressed this in her desire to reperform works that she understood

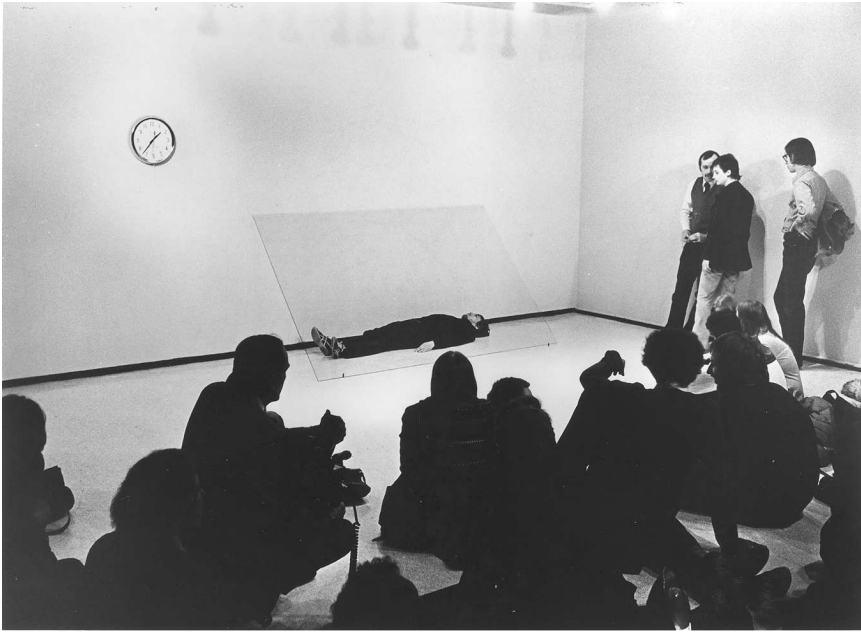
only on the basis of their documentation: “These pieces from the ’70s. Often there are only some recordings, sometimes testimonies, bad photographs, small texts, some people saw something, extremely small audiences. . . . It’s a different time, a different context, but I think that the experience of the ’70s was so valuable that it could be repeated in the ’90s, and we can only relate through the remaining texts and documentation.”³⁴ Abramović argued that performance documentation could be used as a “performance-score,” on the basis of which she—or anyone else—could reperform works they had never themselves seen.³⁵

However problematic its actual manifestations may have been (discussed in Chapter 4), Abramović’s vision of reperformance captures the doubleness that has to be taken into account in the experience of performance, which also extends the duration of performance (as do memory, hearsay, and rumor). The duration of performance, or even the fact that it has duration, is seen to have emphasized the embodiment of subjectivity, which unfolds in time.³⁶ If we take into account the temporality of double experience—in the moment, and extending well beyond that moment—then we are perhaps better able to allow a more complex picture of the duration of performance. If that duration refers not only to the length of time in which a performance initially unfolded, but also to the extended time of the work’s reception, then the duration of performance might be seen as the time in which an audience might be transformed into something else. This would also depend on whether the artist models its transformation into a public—as in Acconci’s case, a move that was bound to fail, as we shall see—or a dire version of community—as in the work of Burden and Abramović—or whether the artist seeks to remove almost any barrier between the experience of the art audience and other kinds of experience, as in Hsieh’s last works. But this transformation need not be bound to the initial moment: in the case of Hsieh’s performances of great length, and their status as objects of rumor and conjecture, such a delay is in any case necessary. Certainly, the length of time of some performances placed onerous demands on audiences, which were met in various ways. The violence that intensified and ended up factionalizing the audience in *Rhythm 0* unfolded in time.

Duration, in this sense, can be seen to have been deployed manip-

ulatively, as it also was in several of Burden's performances where it was open-ended. *Doomed* (1975), for instance, saw Burden set a clock to twelve o'clock and lie down on the floor of the gallery, under a large pane of glass leaning against the wall, leaving no further instruction. In response, no one knew what to do. The museum remained open for two nights. The audience was at first hostile, according to Burden: they "had a blood lust, they wanted some blood, they were angry, there were two or three bodyguards around the piece and people were taking off their bras and throwing them, and coins." Eventually, however, the audience turned sympathetic: "there was this vigil of people that were always there, twenty-four hours a day." The piece ended when, "on the third day, one of the attendants put a big carafe of water under the glass, and to me that upset the formal arrangement."³⁷ Burden had left the responsibility for how to end the piece up to the museum (or any other possible external factors), but had neglected to inform them of this. But duration needn't only refer to long or open-ended periods of time: in *Shoot*, by contrast, it was the brevity of the piece that curtailed the range of possible audience responses.

Generally speaking, then, in relation to presence, viewer activation, and duration, we have to allow that performance art does not *only* happen when and where it happens. And given the importance of its documentation, however flimsy that may be, especially in terms of the doubleness of experience, it is a viable claim that the afterlife of performance is as important as the initial moment, insofar as that is when and where its meanings unfold, and that is where it generates transformations of the audience that are not strictly event-reliant.³⁸ Against this, Peggy Phelan argues that performance is important because it "honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward."³⁹ But *both* visible and invisible traces are surely important if we allow for the transformation of that limited number of people, not as discrete individuals who might or might not be profoundly affected by their experience, but as the objects of imagination and speculation as to how their experience—framed, shaped, and manipulated by an artist—might have implications for the role, and the very *idea* of the audience.



Doomed

Museum of Contemporary Art
Chicago
April 11, 1975 8 p.m.

My performance consisted of three elements: myself, an institutional wall clock, and a 5' x 8' sheet of plate glass. The sheet of glass was placed horizontally and leaned against the wall at a 45 degree angle; the clock was placed to the left of the glass at eye level. When the performance began, the clock was running at the correct time. I entered the room and reset the clock to twelve midnight. I crawled into the space between the glass and the wall, and lay on my back. I was prepared to lie in this position indefinitely, until one of the three elements was disturbed or altered. The responsibility for ending the piece rested with the museum staff, but they were unaware of this crucial aspect. The piece ended when Dennis O'Shea placed a container of water inside the space between the wall and the glass, 45 hours and 10 minutes after the start of the piece. I immediately got up and smashed the face of the clock with the hammer, recording the exact amount of time which had elapsed from beginning to end.

Chris Burden, *Doomed*, 1975.

© Chris Burden. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

The art-historical reception of performance art is further troubled by Judith Butler's analyses of the performative.⁴⁰ A linguistic reading of performance art follows naturally enough, from an art-historical perspective, given performance art's contiguity with conceptual art and conceptual art's emphasis on the underlying conditions of aesthetic experience, centrally linguistic conditions, ahead of sensual perception—this, despite the apparent contradiction between performance art's radically embodied acts and conceptual “dematerializa-

tion.”⁴¹ (This is only an apparent contradiction, which is offset by the argument for distanciation and mediation in performance art.) It follows, particularly, that Butler’s view of the sedimentation of repeated, normative behaviors *as* bodies should be of interest in relation to performance art, although Butler has distinguished clearly between performance and performativity: “Performance as bounded ‘act’ is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice.’”⁴²

Leaving aside bad arguments for voluntaristic self-iteration, this allows for interpretations of such apparently contrasting performances as Acconci’s incessant seductive wheedlings and Hsieh’s self-incarceration in *Cage Piece*, in terms of their exaggeration of the performative reiterability of subjectivity. Acconci’s verbal repetitions and Hsieh’s obsessive markings, as desperate, hyperbolic attempts to establish the parameters of the subject, point to subjectivity’s normative character. This is particularly interesting not only because it presents both subjectivity and the body as effects, but also because it troubles the versions of agency that tend to go hand in hand with radically embodied subjectivities, in the wake of minimalism.⁴³ Taking a cue from the linguistic turn, then, which allows for an understanding of performance art in terms of situations in which any particular subjectivity is only one element, it is possible to make a case, instead, for an interest in performance art that, as much as it dwells on subjectivity, also tends to evade it—however unsuccessfully, though that may be the point, and however much against the grain of appearances.

The work of Acconci, Burden, Abramović, and Hsieh has tended to produce questions about what *kind* of people they are.⁴⁴ In the literature, Acconci’s performance work, especially, is conventionally seen to be centrally concerned with subjectivity, and less abstractly, Acconci’s self.⁴⁵ Yet from early in his career, even in what seemed like the most grueling of confessions, Acconci typically deployed grammatical “shifters,” in such a way as to undercut any autobiographical claim to truth.⁴⁶ The mediation in play in a faux-confessional work like *Airtime* (1973), which purports to detail an abusive relationship but where narrative collapses in a welter of shifting contexts, has the effect of

turning the audience into a necessary mechanism for intimate self-reckoning.⁴⁷ This is equally true of *Seedbed*, of course, where the audience becomes the medium for Acconci's sexual fantasy. It may be a question of emphasis, though none the less important for that, but here we can see *Seedbed* as a work that presents subjectivity as woven among multiple positions and decentered, but which is still "about" subjectivity; or, we can see it as a work which *begins* with the mediation, attenuation, and dispersal of subjectivity, and which is centrally concerned with the categories and mechanisms of which subjectivity is an effect. Yet it is never clear from Acconci's example—or Burden's, Abramović's, or Hsieh's—whether any elements of subjectivity might persist, or which ones, in the various circumstances—public, private, neither, or both—in which, so to speak, we find ourselves.

Performance art disturbed relations between public and private in such a way as to disturb relations between artist and "the viewer," who becomes part of the audience. It follows upon performance art's interrogation of public and private that we ask how that first group that formed around a work, the audience, might become something else. We can begin by calling that something else a public, if it is an image of the event-reliant body, the audience, turned outward, or back outward, toward the street, toward public space. Among the artists here, it is Acconci who goes in this direction (ending up, after all, as a designer of public spaces, if often counter-intuitive ones).⁴⁸ This public is a residual locus of discourse and activity, which has a relation both to the protest culture of the sixties and seventies and to the temporality of performance art, with its awareness of a double audience. The idea of the audience becoming a public allows for a connection between those moments (between a moment when there was a protest culture, and now). This public nonetheless suggests bodies moving in space—which in turn suggests performance, in a general sense—and a moment in which "public" and "protest" could be connected.

As early as 1962, though, Habermas had recognized that the public sphere had been structurally transformed. Since then, the increasing mediation of experience—in the early twenty-first century, increasingly via digital technologies and the internet—means that the public sphere is harder and harder to locate. Following the logic of com-

modification in Habermas, Michael Warner argues that publicity is now “generally mediated by the discourse of consumption,” in such a way that the (false) universality of the idealized bourgeois public sphere has given way to paradoxically generalized, minoritizing effects, in relation to mass media: “It is in the very moment of recognizing ourselves as the mass subject . . . that we also recognize ourselves as minority subjects.”⁴⁹ For Warner, that mass subject’s “self-alienation” is a crucial ground for contemporary political struggle. In a related vein, insofar as he also speaks to the atomization and interiorization—and the *strangeness*—of publicness, Thomas Keenan reflects that the public sphere cannot be imagined as a location: “The ‘public sphere’ cannot simply be a street or a square, someplace where I go to become an object or instead heroically to reassert my subjectivity, some other place out into which I go to ‘intervene’ or ‘act.’ If it is anywhere, the public is ‘in’ me, but it is all that is not me in me, not reducible to or containable within ‘me.’”⁵⁰

The public sphere begins to appear as something like a “horizon of experience,” a phrase borrowed from Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s fundamental critique of Habermas, *Public Sphere and Experience*. For Negt and Kluge, this referred to the limits of proletarian experience, as it was blocked from publicness by the media machine operating on behalf of bourgeois interest (in their account, the universality claimed for the bourgeois public sphere is seen entirely as a mask for exploitative class interests). Taking into account the refinements suggested by Warner and Keenan, I am using the phrase in a more general sense, to indicate that a functioning, participatory public sphere operates as the horizon of the contemporary political imaginary. New media have altered the terms of political discourse and public discourse, and therefore, necessarily, they have changed the status of bodies on the street in pursuit of political and public ends. So it may be necessary to shift away from the assumption of a connection between place and publicness, in order to account for the continuing attraction of performance art in the 1970s in any way that is not simply nostalgic for a public sphere.

One starting point for a reconsideration of the transformation of the audience is represented by Burden’s *Shoot*. That work presents a situation in which—in the context of the Vietnam War—the constitu-

tion of a public around a violent event and its representations in an art context is essentially continuous with the larger social context. So the violent event of *Shoot* and its representations (as photograph and video), depended upon the acquiescence of a group of people who knew what was going on. Burden, who said of his early works, “I’d set it up by telling a bunch of people, and that would make it happen,”⁵¹ became, though only to a degree, subject of and to that group.⁵² The continuity between art and non-art contexts means that what performance art does is not after the fact, not reflective, and it is the manipulation of scale (the miniaturization of the whole event, including its audience) that leaves the constitution of publics around performance art as simultaneously continuous with and distantiated from the constitution of other publics. The manipulation of scale of the public (as though the public, or the idea of the public, had become a medium) may resonate with the manipulations of the scale of objects in pop and minimalism, which had their own dealings with the categories of public and private. But this is in the end a somewhat formal, automatic effect: the enclosure of the public so that it might see itself as such, as if this would necessarily produce a critique of public-formation more generally. If *Shoot* worked only by means of such continuity and miniaturization, however, it would lack a crucial affective dimension which is central to the shift in how we might imagine the audience, from becoming a public, to becoming a version of a community.

I argue in detail in Chapter 3 that the version of community that *Shoot* generates is aversive, nonetheless the violence of the work engenders the requisite affective dimension. That the work should transform its audience into such an aberrant form of community is perhaps only fitting in a time of war. It speaks to the work’s continued relevance in a global political moment characterized by fanaticism and belligerence, when “we” are continually called to join with the like-minded, calls which, whether they issue forth in the name of nation or god, leave vast numbers of people—on both sides of a power divide—feeling disaffected and silenced.

The critique of community is explored in more detail in Chapter 4. My concern is with a concept that might help in dealing with the affects and effects of the moment in which we look back at performance art in the 1970s. My suspicion is that a negative conception of

community—with its connotations of the common and the communal—that is adumbrated in performance art may be useful to ward off like-mindedness. There is a performance art joke that asks “Why did the performance artist cross the road?” The answer is “I don’t know. I left before it ended.” This observation is quite astute about performance art from a number of perspectives: it captures its painful, experimental duration and the demands made on its audiences; it perceives the fact that any particular end might not have been the point; it recognizes its after-the-factness—you did not really need to be there, after all. But perhaps more importantly, the joke also dramatizes a moment of refusal of like-mindedness: I left before it ended, I walked out, I wanted nothing more to do with it. In a productively malign version, this is exactly the dynamic that performance art sets up, that it courts, in presenting limit-case opportunities for community.

The year 1974 saw Abramović’s repetition-with-a-difference of Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* of a decade earlier. Ono had sat cross-legged and passive, dressed in her best clothes, providing scissors with which viewer-participants might cut a gift from her clothes. Inevitably, as it seems, men would attempt to strip her, the rest of the audience looking on, however much they might have disapproved.⁵³ For *Rhythm o*, Abramović arranged an array of things on a table in a gallery in Naples and then identified herself as an object along with them. *Do with me what you will*, she said. Like Ono, Abramović remained completely passive, and—except for the aggression bound to that—transferred agency to the audience. As in the case of *Cut Piece*, the level of violence and violation intensified over time. But in the smaller, less formal setting of the gallery, and with a less precise invitation to shape their response, the audience ultimately factionalized, with one group defending Abramović against another, when, we are given to believe, a loaded gun was being worked into her hand.⁵⁴ Both groups, her attackers and perhaps especially her defenders, may represent communities of last resort.

In the desperate little moments presented in *Shoot* and *Rhythm o*, however, little was at stake, and there was in each case a potential opening up toward community. But in each case that always mythical, face-to-face, identifiable “us” (which “public” never pretended to) was foreclosed, left only as an intimation; a potential limned only in its

breach, in its (inevitable) betrayal before the fact. In this sense they may be read as performances that were deeply suspicious of the protest culture in the context of which they took place, a suspicion that might be translated into a more general suspicion of the formation of any like-minded group whatever. Danger to other people, real or symbolic, did not—except in the most attenuated way, finally, in *Rhythm 0*—generate an affective communal agency. There do, however, seem to have been opportunities either not to show up (when invited to *Shoot*, for instance), or to walk away, to leave before it ended. Posing that as an option is hardly a call to action, but if it is there to be considered, then as I have suggested, performance art may issue a very contemporary call to think about what “we” are prepared to put up with, and in what name.

There are no innocent bystanders. Such a statement can only be proffered cautiously, of course—the artists’ work is complex, contradictory, not at all didactic—but it serves as a device to emphasize the shared, ultimately ethical dimension to their performances. Acconci, Burden, Abramović, and Hsieh all put their audiences—and the very idea of an audience—under pressure: What constituted an audience? Did they have to be present at an event or could they experience it in mediated form? What were their roles, in person or after the fact? Acconci, for instance, did so by engaging his audience willy-nilly in the traffic in sexual fantasy, and first Burden and then Abramović manipulated their audiences’ participation in violent events, before Hsieh virtually abandoned the audience altogether. Typically, audiences were pressured to suspend normal ethical judgment, in the name of art, with the effect that they were confronted (actually or ideally, in the moment or after the fact) with their role as audience members and with the choices they must make (or just made)—hence, no one was innocent, no one merely stood by, even to leave the room was consequential.

One shift described in this book moves from the critique of the minimalist account of publicness (see Chapter 1) to the generation of aberrant models of community founded in an ambivalent relation to protest culture. In conjunction with this, it is also necessary to track another, intertwined movement, from the active provocation of the audience to the artist making work in secret. As we have begun to see,

there are attempts on the part of these artists to transform the audience, first into a public (Acconci), already undercut by his own undermining of the public/private split, and subsequently into fraught, negative forms of community (Burden, Abramović, Hsieh). These attempts are on the one hand rooted in a critical departure from minimalist aesthetics, and on the other hand derive from a complicated relation to protest culture, such that performances participate in the generation of public, evidently symbolic gestures, but hold at arm's length any subsequent sense of group identity or solidarity, with the effect of undermining the value of those very symbols. In line with the argument that performance is as much concerned with the evasion or critique of subjectivity as in articulating it, they might best be described as escape attempts, insofar as they disarticulate artistic subjectivity from the artists' own presence in their works, which are in turn disallowed from being seen as complete in themselves. The overall effect is of an ironic form of self-liberation. This is one way to make sense, for instance, of that remark of Burden's referred to earlier, reflecting on *Shoot*—which generated the iconic image of the artist, back to the wall, facing a man with a rifle to his shoulder—that “being shot . . . is as American as apple pie,” or of the image from *Rhythm 5* of Abramović, lying unconscious in the center of a burning Yugoslavian five-pointed star.⁵⁵ Both of these examples suggest the potentially dire consequences of attempts to escape the oppressive nature of specifically national identities. Both also placed considerable demands on their immediate audiences, who had to decide whether to act in a way that would offset those potential consequences. Adding insult to injury, so to speak, Burden also forced the suspension of that decision by allowing so little time for any possible intervention, whereas two members of Abramović's audience had time to carry the unconscious artist out of harm's way.

Overall, these escape attempts move from more violent or shocking actions to less—at least on the part of the artists. This is what we see, from Burden being shot in 1971, and Acconci masturbating in (semi-) public in 1972, through Abramović submitting herself to her audience in *Rhythm 0* in 1974, or Burden's passivity in *Doomed*, of 1975, to Hsieh's *One Year Performance 1985–1986*, the *No Art Piece*, in which he did not participate in art at all for one year, and finally, to the subsequent

thirteen years at the end of which Hsieh announced that he had kept himself alive. The artist's self-presentation shifts from actively provocative or taboo-breaking, through more subtly challenging positions, to near-invisibility. In shorthand, perhaps, it moves from active to passive, or from assertive gestures on the artists' part to the refusal of any gesture. By the end of *Tehching Hsieh 1986–1999*, it might seem that there were no bystanders at all, because there was nothing to stand by. Alternatively, however, we might see the situation defined by Hsieh as one in which the very category of the bystander—as safely disengaged or casual observer, whether audience-member or passerby—is rendered null and void.

What is important in the kind of phylogenetic relationships among the four artists' careers that I describe in the following chapters is not just the empirical nature of the performances, but a common recognition that the transformation of the audience required less direct stimulus than this or that physical extremity endured by the artist. Rather than experiment with the category of art in terms of what the artist might do, all of these artists discovered moments in which the refusal or restriction of artistic presence was powerfully transformative of art, and hence of how the audience could be imagined.

Acconci would subsequently claim that long before the formation in 1988 of Acconci Studio, the collaborative enterprise in which he designs public spaces, his work had been “heading toward—or at least yearning for—public space” since the mid-seventies.⁵⁶ As his body receded from the scene of performance, in works like *Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway)* (1976),⁵⁷ Acconci issued the ironic invitation to the audience to launch itself back into the public, into the street, via a diving board or plank that he had conveniently provided. But the very irony of diving in, or walking the plank, suggested the ambivalent lure of public space. That space, Acconci would later write, functions as a “container of bodies,” which “trembles at the boiling point”: “The wonder of the city is: with all these bodies crowded next to each other, one on top of the other—why aren't they all tearing each other's clothes off, why aren't they all fucking each other, left and right. . . . The wonder of the city is: with all these bodies blocking each other, standing in each other's way, why aren't they all tearing each other apart limb from limb, and wolfing each other down?”⁵⁸



Vito Acconci, *Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway?)*, 1976.

© Acconci Studio. Photo: Vito Acconci

Public space, he concluded, “is wishful thinking.”⁵⁹ The audience of *Where We Are Now*, then, was left in—or, as—an ethical no man’s land. Pointed toward public space, toward the transformation from an audience into a public, that choice was at once curtailed by the recognition that public space was exclusionary (seating at the long table in the gallery was determined by rounds of musical chairs) and riven by contestation and desire (as appealing and/or terrifying as they might be).

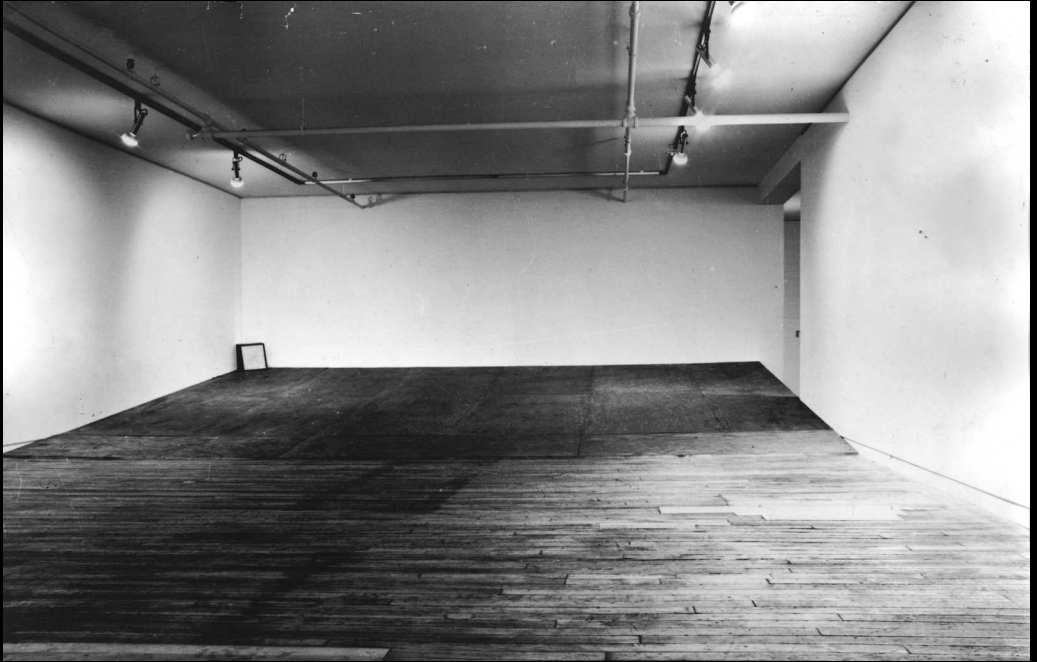
While Burden’s career has also moved away from directly confrontational performances, it was nonetheless *Shoot* that spurred the reflection on celebrity that runs through his work. *Shoot*, in providing for, or appearing to provide for, a moment of empathy that would generate community, ultimately forestalled that in favor of the spectacle of art: the “elegant and precise artwork,”⁶⁰ as Burden would refer to it. So the transformation of the audience into a community was opened up as a possibility, but that community was stunted by its subjection—at the artist’s hand—to a version of what sociologists have referred to as the “bystander effect.”⁶¹ The “bystander effect” describes a situation in which any individual is less likely to intervene, when encountering an untoward event, as the number of bystanders increases: in the case of *Shoot*, it is not their number that prevents any intervention, but Burden’s manipulation of duration of the work (its brevity), coupled with his manipulation of their prior standing as members of the art community, or “art connoisseurs,” as he called them, who, “having some understanding of my intentions, had to suppress their normal instincts and participate in the violence.”⁶² So, in a moment in which acquiescence in or opposition to violence, on a global scale, was an urgent issue, art—in this instance continuous with the larger spectacle of violence—might, in Burden’s caustic analysis, trump the possibility of intervention.

In *Rhythm o*, Abramović, too, courted intensity, if not outright violence. Like *Shoot*, *Rhythm o* incorporated the potential for the transformation of audience into community (in an imagined alternate version, Abramović might be read to, bathed, and fed). Rather than brevity, though, it is the extension in time of Abramović’s willed passivity that forestalls that possibility. Instead, Abramović has explained: “I was really violated: they cut my clothes, they put the

thorns of the roses in my stomach, they cut my throat, they drank my blood, one person put the gun in my head and then another took it away.”⁶³ Ultimately it took not just the threat but the fact of bodily harm, if not the threat of death, for a precarious and contested instant of community to arise. In the end, it is Hsieh’s near-abandonment of the audience—which is left to operate only as a potentiality—that helps to make it clear that what emerges from *Rhythm o*, and then from Hsieh’s own work, is a sense of community as a horizon of experience that is anything but empirical, and principally defined in the breach.

Performance after Minimalism

FANTASIES OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE



The transformations of the audience effected in Acconci and Burden's early performances are rooted in their relations to minimalism, in particular minimalism's own revisioning of art's status as public. The relations between minimalism and performance art from the late sixties and early seventies have not been adequately discussed.¹ This despite the fact that in the early 1960s, important minimalists had clearly operated—at least in New York—in a milieu in which minimalist or proto-minimalist practices were developed alongside different kinds of performance.² Acconci and Burden are central figures in American performance art from the period, which especially in its more systematic, less gestural or expressive versions has most commonly been related to conceptual art.³ Without denying that there are conceptual aspects to Acconci's and Burden's early works, their performances emerged from a more immediate relation to minimalism.⁴ In fact the questions that minimalism raised about the embodiment of aesthetic experience, and about its status as public, were clearly relevant for performance art; this chapter explores that relationship.

Not long after the fact, in 1977, Acconci referred to his performance work as “a last gasp of minimalism,”⁵ and twenty years later said that minimalism had been “the father art” for him (while the conceptualists were “sort of over there, doing their own thing”⁶). In 1996, Burden referred to himself as having been a “young minimalist,”⁷ and, as Anne Wagner has observed, this is corroborated by works he made in 1968 as an undergraduate: “fully realized minimalizing works . . . [which] illustrate how promptly a particular version of Minimalism was institutionalized and how fully and easily it could be assimilated by a talented student.”⁸ This is to argue that Acconci and Burden were quite deliberate in their engagement with minimalism. To characterize this engagement, Acconci's and Burden's perfor-

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Vito Acconci, *Seedbed*, 1972.

© Acconci Studio. Photo: Bernadette Meyer

mances were enabled by, yet provided a critique of minimalism. In particular, their work undercut the distinction between the categories of public and private in such a way as to make clear the fault lines running through minimalism's version of publicness.

As performance artists it might seem, almost by definition, that Acconci and Burden should be regarded as "post-medium" artists. But in fact their relation to minimalism implicated their work in a struggle with the status of medium in which minimalism was an important participant. Historically, the gradual devaluation of the importance of traditional mediums to the making of art might be seen, in turn, to help develop the question of the relations between modernism and postmodernism, and there has been a tendency to assume Acconci's and Burden's status as postmodernists.⁹ But postmodernism was not a term or category that was integral to debates over medium in 1970, and neither was it a secure category then, any more than it is now. Instead, their work is more accurately characterized by uneasy, open-ended relations to elements of modernism and postmodernism (particularly *via* the question of medium).

The main characteristics of the three-dimensional minimalist art relevant to a consideration of Acconci's and Burden's work are familiar: simple geometric shapes, industrially fabricated in industrial materials, often repeated in series or grids. The principal artists invoked here, despite their differences, are Robert Morris, Donald Judd, and Carl Andre.¹⁰ Four decades later, minimalism's stubborn objects sometimes seem overburdened by rhetoric, both the artists' own, widely circulated analyses of what they were doing (statements of intention, after all), and the elaborations of their critical champions and opponents. But in a post- and anti-expressionist context, it was seen as minimalism's strength, that its material straightforwardness and compositional severity disallowed the separation of thought from perception. This is one reason that the dominant accounts of American avant-garde art since the sixties begin with the role of these very objects, and of the accompanying rhetoric as well.

The characteristics of these arguments are also by now familiar, within art history, at least. Minimalism punctured the supposed autonomy of modernist art by foregrounding the embodied, temporal quality of the viewer's experience of art. This remained an abstract

analysis of perception and hence subjectivity, to the extent that the experience of art remained generalized, as though it were the same for everyone. Even so, this focus on perception allowed minimalism to open out onto more specific examinations, in turn, of the architectural, institutional, and discursive conditions of perception, and the ideological, linguistic and sexual conditions of the subjective experience of art.¹¹ This insistence on framing conditions begins to speak to the subjective experience of art as a function of public negotiation.

Robert Morris's *Untitled (Slab)* (1962), for instance, was an eight-foot square, one-foot high, plywood plinth, painted grey and suspended a few inches above the floor. Ideally, the large scale of the object combined with the absence of conventional compositional interest would leave one to attend to the relationships between the object, the space in which it was encountered, and the "kinesthetic demands placed upon the body."¹² For Morris, too, the greater distance from one's body necessitated by large objects, in order for them to be seen, structured "the non-personal or public mode" of perception.¹³ So, one would become aware of oneself doing the work of perception, in a particular, *public* context. This emphasis on perception in context was productive for artists after minimalism, in the sense that what constituted the context could be extended and elaborated upon, so that it came to include not just the gallery space but the museum itself, for instance, in its network of social relations—and ultimately, that network of social relations itself would come to be seen as a crucial field for analysis.¹⁴ Similarly, the work of perception came to be seen as conditioned by more complex sets of relationships (to gender and class, for instance). In short, minimalism paved the way for analyses that were postmodern in the sense that they abandoned aesthetic autonomy in favor of emphasis on the "cultural situation" in which art is made and seen;¹⁵ or, as we shall see, in favor of emphasis on the social construction of its subjects (in conceptual art, earthworks, institutional critique, site-specificity, process art, body works, performance art, feminist art, etc.), though I will argue that this emphasis needs to be seen as dependent upon the reimagining of the audience.

Such accounts characteristically refer to performance art, but often, as above, parenthetically or virtually parenthetically.¹⁶ Mini-

malism is described as a major shift in artistic practice after abstract expressionism, which opened the way for a series of developments that followed, the most important of which for a given author are taken up in detail; art historian Benjamin Buchloh, for example, has discussed differences among conceptual practices in terms of artists' different readings of minimalism.¹⁷ Forms held to be subsidiary are listed in evidence (site-specificity, process art, body works, performance art, feminist art, and so on).

The parenthetical appearance of performance art stems in part from the fact that it is a notoriously imprecise category, which since the 1960s has taken in everything from versions of nightclub stand-up comedy to orgiastic rituals drenched in animal blood. In fact, performance has emerged in some relation to every post-1945 version of avant-gardism, including abstract expressionism, if we accept the interpretation of Jackson Pollock's horizontal canvas as an arena.¹⁸ So performance art is not a category that connotes the kind of stylistic continuity that might constitute one of the "movements" that tend to drive art history (although in various of its manifestations it has certainly generated "scenes").¹⁹ My goal in rehearsing this type of art-historical formulation is not to dismiss it, as it remains an important framework for my own understanding of performance art. But just as performance art's lack of stylistic continuity itself may point to some of the limitations of histories driven by movements (which inevitably involve some generalization), so shifts in emphasis within the broad narrative in which minimalism remains a central turn may allow for more complex, ultimately less formalist accounts.²⁰

So, the task in picking particular performance artists out of their parentheses—in this chapter, Acconci and Burden—is not to dispute the general direction of the narrative, despite some enthusiasts' claims that performance is *the* category that unsettles all other aesthetic categories and narratives.²¹ The logic in terms of which minimalism's focus on perception as an embodied process raises or points to questions, which are taken up in some performance art, about artists' and viewers' bodies seems quite apparent. Rather, the task is to elaborate some of the nuances of performance art's role in the story, and their effects on the story.

Two of the main characters in the story of minimalism's reception

are the categories of public and private. This was intimated by Morris in his “Notes on Sculpture” in 1966, and emerged more fully in 1973 when Rosalind Krauss published the essay “Sense and Sensibility: Reflections on Post ’60s Sculpture,” one of the first attempts to track the aesthetic legacies of minimalism. Among its foremost critical champions, Krauss argued that the significance of the art of the minimalist generation was that it “staked everything” on the truth of a model of subjectivity and meaning “severed from the legitimizing claims of a private self.”²² The achievement of Frank Stella’s black paintings, in Krauss’s example (but one might add the work of Morris and Donald Judd that Michael Fried had railed against in “Art and Objecthood”), was “to have fully immersed themselves in meaning, but to have made meaning itself a function of surface—*of the external, the public, or a space that is in no way a signifier of the a priori, or of the privacy of intention.*”²³ This was played out in the work of a subsequent generation, broadly speaking, of post-minimalist and conceptual artists. Among them was Mel Bochner, some of whose works Krauss described, tellingly, as accomplishing “a kind of necessary purging of the fantasy of privacy from his art.”²⁴ For Krauss, then, the achievement of minimalism was to banish from art (albeit, in retrospect, temporarily) a version of meaning that issued from an imagined, private, interior mental space. Instead, both meaning and subjectivity itself became available for negotiation in the newly open space of minimalism, negotiation which might be termed public, if only in a rather formal, abstract sense.²⁵

This is a limited sense of what public might mean, which implies that what is public is self-evident, an implication that seems at odds with minimalism’s own introduction of the viewer’s body, with its uncertain peculiarities, into the aesthetic equation. It sits more comfortably, though, with the phenomenological abstraction, “the body,” which tends to make all viewers’ and perhaps artists’ bodies equivalent, in such influential rhetoric as that of Krauss and Morris. Hence, critical discussion has tended to focus on the ideal, singular viewer, never mind how crowded one’s actual experience of a gallery might have been. However restricted (or mandarin) this version of experience as public, it was central to minimalism’s questioning of modernist tenets. For it went hand in hand with a demand for a new understanding of

relations between artist and viewer and artwork—relations between subjects and objects—a demand with significant implications for the idea and importance of medium. That is, it marked a rejection of the specifically modernist understanding, which Krauss described critically in a later essay dealing in part with Acconci's work, that the "very possibilities" of the artist "finding his subjectivity necessitate that the artist recognize the material and historical independence of an external object (or medium)."²⁶

This understanding is closely bound to the assumed connection between the structure of the interior life of the artist and the structure of the objects he or she makes; the belief, as Krauss put it elsewhere, in relation to painting, "that everything about the original image is an expression of the inner feelings and thoughts of its maker. This includes the individual strokes of paint—their thickness and variation—as well as the peculiar physiognomy the artist gives to objects and the way he molds the space they occupy." We feel there to be "a correspondence between the space of the image which we can see and the interior psychological and, therefore, invisible space of the author of the image."²⁷ Understood in this way, the "external object (or medium)" opens back into that interior private space, which in turn serves to legitimate whatever has been done with the object. It is this form of legitimation that minimalism's emphasis on meaning as public brought into question.

The slight hesitation of Krauss's parenthesis—"external object (or medium)"—may reveal a confusion in the modernist idea of medium. For on one hand medium seems to refer to a material substance, for instance, *paint*, the artist's manipulation of the specific properties of which (viscosity, transparency, etc.) allows us to distinguish the qualities of brushstrokes and the peculiarities of physiognomies. But on the other hand, medium also refers to a discourse or discipline, for instance, *painting*; that is, it refers to an account of the historical development of conventions for manipulating paint. In terms of the modernist version of medium, the importance of a work of art is "the authenticity with which it bears the imprint of [the artist's] very being."²⁸ But that supposedly private being is always already suspended in and in fact legitimated by its relation to a body of specialized knowledge. The circularity of this legitimation of supposedly private

but actually conventional expression is in part what minimalism exposed in abandoning traditional mediums and expressive relations to them. For if (at least, ideally) the viewer brought meaning to minimalist objects, from outside, as it were, then the authenticity and legitimacy of the work were no longer bound to an individual being, but opened up to a realm of public, intersubjective experience.

However, as Hal Foster has shown in a precise rereading of its crucial texts, if minimalism opened up a new space of subject/object relations, this did not mean that the project of establishing meaning and subjectivity as public proceeded without its own internal contradictions. So, in “Notes on Sculpture,” Morris announced a “death of the author” and birth of the viewer: “The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. . . . One is more aware than before that he [the viewer] himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from the various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.”²⁹ However, as Foster observes, Morris was uncertain about the implications of this shift toward experience as public: “Yet even as Morris announces this new freedom, he seems ambivalent about it: in a flurry of contradictory statements he both pulls back (‘that the space of the room becomes of such importance does not mean that an environmental situation is being established’) and pushes forward (‘Why not put the work outside and further change the terms?’).”³⁰

The equivalences between interior and private and exterior and public, and the dichotomy of interior/private and exterior/public, were unstable then, and remain so. Anyone knows this who has ever caught themselves humming the pop song they just heard in the elevator, or the advertising jingle, or who has drifted into reverie or fantasy in line for the automated teller machine. Nonetheless, these equivalences and dichotomy were asked to carry considerable weight at the time. They had to support the minimalist insistence that meaning and subjectivity were, in their most important dimensions, public. By now there sometimes seems an uneasy fit between minimalism’s plain objects and the highly elaborated claims made for them. Even Judd’s initial response to Morris’s *Untitled (Slab)*, in his guise as critic, was to quote Robert Rauschenberg: “If you don’t take it seriously, there’s nothing to take.”³¹ Subsequently, Judd would come to think

that Morris's work was "minimal visually, but . . . powerful spatially,"³² but the interest of the work had to be developed, even by a broadly sympathetic critic. And Judd's own shiny, polished metal and colored Plexiglas boxes retained elements of internal compositional relations and, like Carl Andre's metal floor pieces, surface incident. But if a broader set of possible interpretations was largely filtered out, then that is symptomatic of the urgency of the insistence on the public nature of meaning at the time.

That urgency seems to have been a response to the perceived inertia of then-regnant, modernist ideas of subjectivity. Foster, for example, describes minimalist rhetoric as contradicting the dual, dominant (and overbearing) interpretations of abstract expressionism. These interpretations rested on "the artist as existential creator (advanced by Harold Rosenberg) and the artist as formal critic (advanced by Greenberg)."³³ In Rosenberg's "expressionist" version of artistic subjectivity, the artist tested the limits of his or her own interior self by testing the limits of both paint and painting, risking the collapse of that self, thrown against the boundaries of the medium. And in Greenberg's cooler, "formalist" version, the artist secured his or her subjectivity in terms of mastery of the historical logic, not of paint but of painting, in terms of which the properties inherent to that medium alone were progressively refined. By the sixties, these subjectivities were well known, and were regarded in some quarters as overblown. In one of the earlier essays seriously to address what would become known as minimalism, for example, the critic Barbara Rose, in 1965, suggested that "one might as easily construe the new, reserved impersonality and self-effacing anonymity as a reaction against the self-indulgence of an unbridled subjectivity, as much as one might see it in terms of a formal reaction to the excesses of painterliness."³⁴

The expressionist and formalist models of subjectivity were also, apparently, in tension with one another. It was minimalism, and the commentary and criticism it engendered, which allowed for the easing of this contradiction.³⁵ What these subjectivities shared was the idea of a private interior to subjectivity, a private mental space that extended behind modernist artworks and was made manifest via the properties of a medium. This is precisely the idea that minimalism and its heirs and critical champions rejected as a fantasy, explicitly,

not only in the production of their work but in writing as well. Minimalism's compositionally simple, repetitive structures presented alternate ways for viewers to experience artworks; this was the main tactic in their attack on the presumed primacy to aesthetic experience of the *artist's* subjective relation to a medium. So Rose could also adumbrate the idea that the point of the new art's impersonality was to empty out that space: "what we are seeing everywhere is the inversion of the personal and the public. What was once private (nudity, sex) is now public and what was once the public face of art at least (emotions, opinions, intentions) is now private."³⁶

Michael Fried's attack on minimalism, "Art and Objecthood," first published in 1967, most forcefully and radically joined expressionist and formalist subjectivities, on the ground of their antipathy toward and anxiety about the very notion of a public dimension to art. Following Greenberg, Fried argued that modernist art's authenticity, its ability to compel conviction as to its quality, rested on its ability to "defeat or suspend its own objecthood" through the rigor of its reflection on its own inherent properties as a medium. If it could not do so, or if, like minimalism, it aspired "on the contrary to discover and present objecthood as such," it would fall into theatre, the realm between the arts (more precisely, between mediums); it would fall, essentially, out of the category of art, into a realm in which works of art are nothing more than objects.³⁷ This much is well known, but what remains to be considered more fully is the model of subjectivity that Fried constructed, especially in terms of the relations between public and private.

Fried's fundamental objection to minimalism was that it confused the relations between subject and object that he saw as appropriate, even necessary, to art. Regarding Morris's interest in control of "the entire situation" in which artworks are encountered, Fried commented, with a tinge of indignant incredulity, that "'the entire situation' means exactly that: *all* of it—including, it seems, the beholder's *body*. There is nothing within his field of vision—nothing that he takes note of in any way—that, as it were, declares its irrelevance to the situation, and therefore to the experience, in question."³⁸ What is implied here is a creeping failure of distinction or propriety. In fact, the minimalist emphasis on

artworks as objects appears in Fried's rhetoric as an example of poor aesthetic hygiene, with all the anxious, moralizing overtones that such an accusation might be expected to carry: objecthood, and concomitantly theatre, "pervert," "envelope," "corrupt," and "infect."³⁹ Minimalism, in Fried's own account, presents the experience of art as public (a term he only uses suspended in quotation marks), insofar as it is an embodied experience of the relations between a subject and an object or objects that happens within specific spatial coordinates, which may be affected by the presence of other people ("the entire situation"), and which extends in time.⁴⁰

Against this, Fried posited as the authentic experience of art a subjective experience of "continuous and entire presentness," or "instantaneousness," in which the viewer's conviction of aesthetic quality is compelled *forever*.⁴¹ But this version of aesthetic experience, at once instantaneous and eternal, risks being removed from any historical circumstance whatever, despite Fried's own insistence on the viewer's knowledge of canonical works as the context for this experience. (Alternately, the achievement of this kind of experience was to exempt the viewer from any historical circumstance.) The radicality of Fried's account lies in this description of a one-to-one relationship between the disembodied yet individuated subjectivities of artist and viewer, floating free of objects, but suspended in an artistic medium. Medium, here, like an occult or spiritual medium, connects subjects whose relation to history is at least rendered uncertain by the transcendental nature of their connection. In the sense that medium provides for this instant, almost magical connection (you either get it, or you do not), it also serves to remove the viewer from the everyday world, from the public realm of museum or gallery.⁴² This is a version of subjectivity—and communication—with no public dimension whatsoever. Meaning is largely reduced to compulsion: the value of the experience lies in being compelled, driven to believe that the modernist work stands up to comparison with canonical, historical works. But the experience tends to remove the viewer from the historical aspects of the comparison (whether we view this as actually transcendental, or as merely idealist), so that what remains as the crucial element of the experience is not the history, which fades very

much into the background, but the compulsion to believe.⁴³ And the tension or contradiction between the existentialist and formalist versions of artistic subjectivity is, again magically, resolved.

Despite the role of the canon in his account, Fried's version of modernist subjectivity does not require public legitimation; value resides in the artwork and emerges as the object is encountered by the single, gifted (even morally superior) viewer. In "Sense and Sensibility," Krauss described a variant of this as "a psychological model in which a self exists replete with its meanings, prior to contact with the world";⁴⁴ the model in which the space of a painting corresponds to and expresses that prior interiority. That the minimalists wanted to overturn or escape this model, as Krauss suggested, is confirmed by Morris's explicit interest in "the non-personal or public mode" of aesthetic experience, which created the "extended situation" that so appalled Fried.⁴⁵ And it is evident in Judd's grounding of his opposition to relational composition in a critique of Cartesian rationalism, and implicitly the subjectivity that went with it:

JUDD: The qualities of European art so far. They're innumerable and complex, but . . . they're linked up with a philosophy—rationalism, rationalistic philosophy.

GLASER: Descartes? [. . .]

JUDD: Yes. All that art is based on systems built beforehand, *a priori* systems; they express a certain type of thinking and logic that is pretty much discredited now as a way of finding out what the world's like.⁴⁶

Minimalism's emphasis on aesthetic experience as public, that is, emerged in a contest over what the world was like, and how it could be understood. Modernist certainties—like Fried's, that the "literalist" sensibility was the "expression of a general and pervasive condition" that was bad⁴⁷—could no longer pass without question (and if not those, what certainties could?). This can be seen as clearly as anywhere in Judd's famous and bluntly provocative substitution of interest for quality: "A work needs only to be interesting."⁴⁸ The minimalist exploration of the public nature of subjectivity and meaning served as the ground—however unstable, as we shall see—for a critique of Cartesian interiority and of the idealist separation of thought from

perception. Instead, the minimalist notion of aesthetic experience as public posited an embodied subjectivity that must negotiate a world of spaces and things.

Minimalism's concern with bodies moving in relation to both artworks and their physical contexts sought to reconnect modernist eyes to the bodies from which they had somehow floated free. Whether they were "specific" in Judd's sense, or "gestalts" in Morris's, this interest in the experience of art as embodied was announced, as Foster observes, "in the *presence* of its objects, unitary and symmetrical as they often are (as Fried saw), just like people."⁴⁹ For Krauss, it followed that part of the meaning of the work "issues from the way in which it becomes a metaphorical statement of the self understood only in experience": "Morris's three *L-Beams* from 1965, for instance, serve as a certain kind of cognate for this naked dependence of intention and meaning upon the body *as it surfaces into the world* in every external particular of its movements and gestures."⁵⁰ On one hand, then, to take a high modernist example, Jackson Pollock's skein of expressive gestures, generated in relation to the possibilities of the specific medium of painting, somehow represents (or, to press the point, is a metaphor or cognate for) an internal, private state of the self. On the other, Morris's gesture-less quasi-architectural integer, arguably beyond the logic of the medium of sculpture, is a metaphor or cognate for subjectivity as it is generated in external, public encounters.⁵¹

The sense that, however surprising minimalist objects appeared at first, they actually intersected with some modernist concerns, and not in a simply negative manner, contributes to the plausibility of Foster's dual, structurally linked assessments: "minimalism is both a contraction of sculpture to the modernist pure object and an expansion of sculpture beyond recognition," and "minimalism appears as a historical crux in which the formalist autonomy of art is at once achieved and broken up."⁵² In the case of both Pollock and Morris, the self is at stake, and following from that, intention and meaning. Where the meaning of Pollock's work, if only in the first instance of its production, is dependent on his body, the distantiation of the *L-Beams* from the tradition of sculpture renders their meaning dependent on the viewer's body (the "*experienced* shape of the individual sections de-

pend, obviously, upon the orientation of the Ls to the space they share with our bodies”).⁵³ But it is not clear that either Morris’s *intention*, to establish this situation, or even his own experience of the installation, was any more public or after the fact than Pollock’s was after the fact of paint, and the encounter with painting.⁵⁴ And the use of “metaphor” and “cognate” to describe the way that Morris’s objects relate to the embodied self suggests a connection that can be apprehended, and seems to concede something to the anthropomorphism that Fried saw (“just like people”).

Morris allowed in “Notes on Sculpture” that “all the aesthetic properties of work that exists in a more public mode have not yet been articulated.”⁵⁵ What is clear is that the self at stake in minimalism is more *abstract* than the actual being of Jackson Pollock or Robert Morris—more like a *subject*, conceived of as a positionality within or effect of a discursive system, than a *self*—whether or not it is in a rigorous sense more public. The central issue here is the idea that subjectivity is dependent on a body that “surfaces into the world,” where the world in this context means the exterior, the public. The minimalist critique of Cartesian subjectivity (in which thought and bodily perception are separate) runs the risk of simply reversing its terms, so that instead of the body appearing as the tool of the cogito, subjectivity appears as the reflex or creature of a purely public body. For in what aqueous or subterranean (or interior) realm has the body been before the world? The question is especially pertinent if the hard distinction between interior/private and exterior/public is disallowed. In that case, the answer must be that the body perpetually surfaces into the world, from the world. And it ceases to be clear to whose body “the body” of minimalist phenomenology refers—the artist’s? the viewer’s? Rather than an embodied bearer of experience, that body becomes nearly as abstract as the disembodied eyes of modernist painting.⁵⁶

In this context, Fried’s suspicion of the publicness of minimalism seems not entirely unwarranted, though not in his own terms. If minimalist subjectivity retained a tendency toward abstraction and generalization, this tendency was rooted in the minimalist conception of the public. The problem, which performance art would make clear, was that the dichotomy of interior/private and exterior/public, upon

which minimalism's claims rested, was (and remains) artificially clear cut. Heuristically, it was able to support minimalism's critique of modernist subjectivity, allowing expressionist universals to be negatively recast as private utterances, private concerns, and hence severing subjectivity from the inherent logic of a medium, whether that was conceived of as the working through of the properties of a substance or the developing conventions of its use.⁵⁷ But the dichotomy needed to be seen as approximate at best. Of course, this was the case not only in the privileged social and theoretical realm of art, but also in late capitalist societies, generally. McLuhan's account of the tentacular reach of technology is relevant here: if we take the penetration of private spaces by the public address of the television as a somewhat literal marker of the way that mass media rendered the public/private distinction amorphous, it is telling that within ten years of its introduction, by 1956, there was a television in roughly seventy-five percent of households in the United States, and that this almost immediately generated a sociology of television.⁵⁸

Given the emphasis on meaning and subjectivity as public in minimalist rhetoric, it is in the larger, mass-mediated context for the instability of the public/private split, as well as in narrower art or art-historical contexts, that minimalism's version of the public needs to be considered. And in this context, minimalism's public realm was no guarantee against the "fantasies of privacy" that it exposed. This was not because of its mandarin quality but because, as with all accounts of the public, it must struggle, on one hand, in its encounter with the specificity of subjects and their differences, and on the other, in relation to the banal, amorphous imaginings of mass media, "the general public," "the American people," whose ideological function is to efface differences. It is this unresolved character of minimalism's version of the public that provided a point of departure, or an opening, for the development of Acconci's and Burden's performance works of the late sixties and early seventies. This is not to suggest that either artist recognized limitations to minimalism's public realm in advance, or that either one addressed such a recognition programmatically. Rather, this recognition emerged in and through their performances; it was frequently inchoate, implicit, or hesitant. Centrally, it might be observed that both Acconci and Burden, in different ways, concealed



Vito Acconci, *Seedbed*, 1972.

© Acconci Studio. Photo: Bernadette Meyer

their desiring, needy selves and bodies within minimalist spaces, with the effect of confronting, even defiling, the abstractly “public” character of those spaces.

It is in the nature of an art-historical truism that Fried, in his hostility to minimalism, produced an accurate account of it. Although he saw the culture at large as pervaded by theatricality, he was unable to predict that artists after minimalism would embrace it as a positive value, or that the incorporation of “extra-artistic” elements would provide for a critique of the abstraction of minimalism’s account of subjectivity and the public. In this context, performance after minimalism took what is at one level the crude step of replacing objects, their presence “just like people,”⁵⁹ with people. Undermining the public/private distinction by performing “private” acts in public—and minimalist—spaces, and in the same gesture undercutting the abstraction of minimalism’s public realm, Acconci and Burden provided a level of specificity in their engagement with the categories of public and private that emphasized the effects on subjectivity of the *collapse* of that distinction.

In January 1972, famously, Acconci masturbated in public—or, not quite. He did exhibit a low wooden ramp in the Sonnabend Gallery, New York. Two feet high at the back, it merged with the floor in the middle of the room. Alone, the ramp might have stood as a stolidly empirical, post-minimalist examination of the architectural and, by extension, institutional conditions of looking at art, which might be related to Morris's *Untitled (Corner Piece)*, 1964, for instance.⁶⁰ The sloping floor drew visitors' attention to their own movement through the familiar white cube of the gallery. But a speaker sat in one corner of the ramp, and underneath was something less self-evident. Twice a week, six hours a day, visitors could listen to Acconci, below, speaking into a microphone the sexual fantasies triggered by the sounds of those above, and masturbating: “. . . you're on my left . . . you're moving away but I'm pushing my body against you, into the corner . . . you're bending your head down, over me . . . I'm pressing my eyes into your hair. . . .”⁶¹

Acconci used a low-tech public address system to broadcast into the gallery a normatively private activity. Doing so, Acconci took the viewer into the realm of his own sexual fantasy, or used the viewers (or visitors) to go there. If this was a fascinating or titillating experience for visitors, it might also have been disconcerting. Not only was this not what you might have expected to hear in a gallery, but the condition of entry into Acconci's fantasy world was as the anonymous representative of the anonymous public, so that sexual fantasy was made into something impersonal, a projection, even an imposition. For while viewers might have responded in various ways, it was Acconci who set the terms for the exchange. This effect remains pointed, even if it was rendered hypothetical, for viewers who knew beforehand what they were getting into.

Perhaps the experience was embarrassing, too, for viewers implicated in Acconci's fantasy involuntarily, with little choice in the matter other than to leave if they did not like it, and that only after the fact. Embarrassment is a response to the social forms of dirt: words or actions out of place, inappropriate to their context (let alone the conventionally “dirty words” of sexual fantasy). It also results from private matters being rendered public. *Seedbed* confused the categories of public and private, breaching the divisions between them.

Specifically, Acconci took sexual fantasy out of any presumed or normative context of privacy (the privacy of one's own room, for instance), or of intimacy between individuals (so denying the reciprocity of mutual masturbation). If there remains an ideological version of fantasy as private, it denies the commodification of bodies in consumer culture and their intimate connections to technologies of mediation. That consumption was at issue is implicit in the way that *Seedbed* undermined the packaging of sexual fantasy, by introducing uncertainty into the relations between artist and viewer, subject and object, consumer and commodity. Acconci's use of the shifter "you," opening a space which any listener could fill, paralleled the interpellations with which advertising disguised its generality, while the work's openly if absurdly sexual nature provided a contrast with such interpellations. In the intermediate, semi-public space of the gallery, fantasy was presented as neither wholly particular to Acconci nor at the level of generality of advertising. Acconci blocked the visual field of his own fantasies: this sensory deprivation might have tested or sharpened fantasy, but it also depersonalized it. And if the separation of fantasy from privacy was unlikely to have been entirely surprising, Acconci's introduction of desire into minimal space nonetheless disrupted minimalism's visual and experiential system, which relied on stable relations between public and private.

A familiar account of *Seedbed* sees it manifesting performance art's tendency to "activate the viewer."⁶² On the contrary, following from the way that it collapsed public and private together, seen most clearly in its presentation of sexual fantasy as at once specific and general, *Seedbed* not only undercut reciprocity but also reversed or confused the dichotomy of active and passive. If Acconci lay passive before anyone set foot in the gallery, then the entry of visitors activated him. In turn, Acconci's response (a type of response he had anticipated) "activated" viewers. But their exchange with Acconci was not fully reciprocal (Acconci set the terms); while their simple presence was a condition for Acconci's activity, their only effective options were to stay or to go. Viewers remained ignorant of the actual circumstances of the performance (was it "real" or "fake"?), while their ignorance was the condition for Acconci's pleasure: it didn't matter who they were, Acconci could make of their presence what he willed and/or

desired. Desire extends beyond volition, so its invocation here furthered the confusion of active and passive. If the activity of Acconci and his viewers was not reciprocal but interdependent, the parties to the event were neither fully active nor completely passive. But the persistence of Acconci's desire in this context, along with the specificity of his language, suggests that the merging of public and private meant that what had been private was not simply canceled out without remainder. If something unidentifiable, irreducibly specific, some private residue of the collapse of public and private, were to remain, where was that located? This question, it seems, lay beneath the ramp of *Seedbed*, where Acconci shuttled between public and private in such a way as to call into question both modernist and minimalist circuits for the legitimation of subjectivity.

Burden's first performance, *Five Day Locker Piece* (26–30 April 1971), similarly demonstrates a critical engagement with minimalism. In the MFA program at the University of California, Irvine, from 1969 to 1971, Burden made a series of sculptural works, each one an "apparatus that was similar to physical exercise equipment. For the viewer, the 'art' occurred during the physical interaction with the apparatus."⁶³ After the fact, at least, Burden's move into performance rested on his understanding of something emphasized by minimalism, "the physical interaction with the apparatus": "The only problem with this body of works was that the apparatus was often mistaken for traditional object sculpture. In a further refinement, I realized I could dispose of the apparatus and simply have the actual physical activity as the sculpture."⁶⁴ Hence, his MFA thesis show: "I was locked in locker number 5 for five consecutive days and did not leave the locker during this time. The locker measured two feet high, two feet wide, and three feet deep. I stopped eating several days prior to entry. The locker directly above me contained five gallons of bottled water; the locker below me contained an empty five gallon bottle."⁶⁵ Despite Burden's remark about disposing with the apparatus, reprises of minimalist conventions are immediately evident in the objective elements of the work. The standardized, industrially produced bank of lockers as a whole formed a simple geometric shape, and individual units were repeated in a grid format.⁶⁶

Once Burden had entered locker number 5 and usurped its use (and



Five Day Locker Piece
University of California, Irvine: April 26-30, 1971

I was locked in locker number 5 for five consecutive days and did not leave the locker during this time. The locker measured two feet high, two feet wide, and three feet deep. The locker directly above me contained five gallons of bottled water; the locker below me contained an empty five gallon bottle

Chris Burden, *Five Day Locker Piece*, 1971.
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that of the ones above and below), the space was charged in a way that translated, into functional terms, Krauss's later definition of minimalist sculpture as "what is in the room that is not really the room,"⁶⁷ an effect intensified by the somewhat liminal, transitory character of the institutional spaces in which such banks of lockers are found, hallways where you go to put something or pick something up on your way somewhere else. Where Krauss referred to the distinction between the artwork and its architectural context, Burden shifted the distinction between artwork and context from a principally spatial register to one emphasizing function (neatly drawing together minimalism and the readymade). Doing so—together with his treatment of his own body—suggests a commentary on or critique of minimalism's phenomenological emphasis on bodies visible in space. Minimalist subjectivity depended on a body that "surfaced" into the world. Burden's public, physical *withdrawal* from the world in *Locker Piece* challenged that idea. Burden's gesture might be seen as a retrograde reaffirmation of a traditional version of artistic subjectivity, via a romanticized asceticism. But Burden's withdrawal points to a critical aspect of his work's departure from minimalism. At first glance, *Locker Piece* might seem to have addressed the generality of minimalism's subject directly, even crudely. The body and subjectivity being put through the ordeal were Burden's own. Hence the argument made by the post-conceptual artist Mary Kelly that performance art is a last gasp of modernism. After minimalism's abandonment of a traditional relation to a medium, the "signifiers of a unique artistic presence" returned in performance: "the artist *is* present and creative subjectivity is given as the effect of an essential self-possession, that is, of the artist's body and his inherent right of disposition over it."⁶⁸ On the contrary, the qualification of presence in Burden's work—and Acconci's, hidden or partly hidden as they were—offers no such unproblematic affirmation of "creative subjectivity." In *Locker Piece*, for instance, Burden barely appeared physically. There were no gestures and no images, save the single, blank, black-and-white photograph of the bank of lockers, which together with Burden's equally affectless written description and the padlock serves to record the work. While Burden conversed with visitors through the locker door, his experience remains mainly at the level of identification, especially for viewers restricted to the documentation:

far from being bound to Burden's presence, the experience becomes a fantasy or imagining of one's own body. A convention within positive critical responses to performance art holds that the artist's own body became his or her medium.⁶⁹ *Locker Piece* so qualified Burden's presence as to evade this convention with Houdini-like adroitness, effectively problematizing both Kelly's criticism and enthusiasts' claims for the "realness" and immediacy of performance.

Burden's presence was first qualified in that he removed his body from sight (as if to engage the sense of minimalist objects as hollow). Although Burden spoke to his visitors, he largely removed himself from sensual perception. His presence was subsequently qualified, after the fact, in being restricted to the form of its documentation (which does not include his image). The implications of this reservation of presence are seen most clearly in a consideration of Burden's approach to the critique of interiority that Krauss argued was central to minimalism. For if in its conception *Locker Piece* was a hyperbolic "fantasy of privacy," it was structured as a series of interiors within interiors, like a set of Russian dolls, the center of which was, in a sense, empty.

The institutional architecture of the art school contained the room that contained the locker that contained Burden. Within the somewhat unstable space that such lockers occupy (administratively, it is easy enough to move them, when space is scarce), individual lockers function as "private" enclaves. This privacy is immediately circumscribed by whether or not it is, for instance, legally viable, and by its generic quality, which consists in the personalizing of institutional property with mementos, snapshots, graffiti, etc., alongside books and materials that are common to numbers of students. Burden carried personalization to its limits by inhabiting the locker, substituting a self for the objects that are ordinarily used to express it. He might have raised the question of how private those spaces were (and implicitly, those selves). He certainly encountered the possibility that there were legal or administrative limits to that privacy, as he did not seek official permission for the performance, and discussions took place as to whether he should be forcibly removed from the locker.⁷⁰ Burden's occupation of the locker, as one of a repetitive series of identical spaces, the privacy of which was qualified and of which the user, or occupant, did

not have sole proprietorship, transformed the locker into a highly ironic model of the kind of interiority that minimalism sought to dispense with. This irony was emphasized by the setting in an art school, so that the locker became, specifically, a model of artistic interiority (isolated, hungry, cramped, uncomfortable). So *Locker Piece* conformed to the minimalist project of producing a definitively post- or anti-expressionist art that rendered meaning and subjectivity public. But it simultaneously put into play notions of privacy and ownership, however problematic, which minimalism banished in its desire for public meaning.

The residual physical apparatus of *Locker Piece*, activated by Burden's use, served, up to a point, to pursue the (minimalist) question of how private interiority actually was. Yet the performance implied the naïveté of any conception of the public realm as simply exterior or self-evident. For the experience of bodily constraint, sensory deprivation, and physical and mental endurance that took place at the center of the work was invisible, recalcitrantly Burden's own, but at the same time neither entirely private nor entirely public. Just as lacking in incident as minimalism's objects, in appearance, *Locker Piece* contained an extreme but hidden experience. It was hidden in public, though, to the extent that people knew about it within an art-institutional and in fact bureaucratic context; it was Burden's MFA thesis exhibition, that is, his professional qualification as an artist depended on it, so that as with minimalism, subjectivity was at stake, but in this case in a very specific form. Burden's "official" subjectivity as a "qualified" artist was bound up with the work, and it is possible to see in his unofficial withdrawal from view a challenge to that process of legitimation.⁷¹ This remains the case, even though Burden's withdrawal was not total, and is better regarded as a parodic experiment into the minimal presence required of a "visual artist." So it cannot be described as private in any uncomplicated way, as Burden's 1973 account makes clear: "I didn't know what it was going to feel like to be in that locker, that's why I did it. I thought it was going to be all about isolation; it turned out to be just the opposite. I was seeing people every single minute for thirteen, fourteen hours a day, talking to them all the time."⁷²

Neither can the work be described as public in any straightforward way, especially in any way that equates public and spatial relations.

Burden's statement allows the suggestion that the visitor's experience was *not* bound to an orientation in space. Similarly, it might be said that *Locker Piece* served as an explicit demonstration that intention and meaning might depend upon the *disappearance* of the body from view. It might then provide a sardonic contrast to minimalism's version of the public. The meaning of Morris's *L-Beams*, for instance, depended on the reduction or generalization of viewers' bodies to their spatial orientation; the meaning of the *L-Beams* may even be said to *be* their ability to perform this relativizing function. Everyone is then equal and has an equal role in establishing that meaning (except, it seems, the artist, who, having made the objects and put them in the space seems curiously absent from subsequent proceedings).

Locker Piece, by contrast, did not communicate what was apparently its central experience by the conventionally visual means of the artist, or by the manipulation of an object. That experience was not public, in that it was neither immediately shared nor able to be appropriated as the object of a recognizable body of specialized knowledge. Instead, Burden described it in conversational exchanges. These exchanges seem to replicate a quotidian sense of public interaction (say, people discussing or debating something they have seen), rather than the phenomenological exchanges entailed by minimalism. However, they too rested on a paradoxical disembodiment, though one that was more explicitly integral to the performance. These conversations depended, that is, on the split between Burden's effectively disembodied voice, privileged by his invisible ordeal, and the hidden body undergoing that ordeal (not visually self-evident, requiring explication). *Locker Piece*, then, presented a complex account of the relations between subjectivity, meaning and the body, in which the body—Burden's own, his treatment of which determined his subjectivity as public, both in the terms of the work and bureaucratically—was both crucial, as pretext, and visually irrelevant.

In this sense, Burden's description of his body as a kind of minimally transformative conduit, linked to full and empty water bottles, above and below, is telling. *Locker Piece* provides a commentary on the absence of the artist from the spaces of minimalism, suggesting that subjectivity is no more entirely public than it is entirely private. Burden, for whom "what I do is separate from me as a person,"⁷³ was not

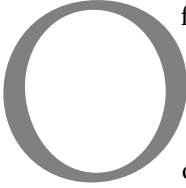
accounted for either by self-imposed, if unpredictable, physical conditions, or unplanned conversations with visitors. Rather, the subjectivity generated by the work occupied each of a series of different kinds of interiors, from the interior of Burden's body to the locker to the room to the "internal" workings of the art school bureaucracy. Their infiltration by the subjectivity generated in Burden's semi-public semi-withdrawal revealed what minimalism had repressed, the unstable relations of interiority to the categories of public and private.

Minimalism had employed new forms of spatial organization to suppress modernist subjectivity, interiority, and the "fantasy of privacy," so that new models of experience, subjectivity, and meaning could emerge as public effects, in new circuits of legitimation. If perhaps only ideally, this had the democratizing effect of making the realm of public negotiation visible as such, and audience members aware of their role there. Acconci's ramp and Burden's bank of lockers clearly invoked minimalist forms, but the highly qualified, fraught presence of their own bodies destabilized the abstraction of minimalist space by disallowing any clear distinction between public and private realms, a distinction upon which the minimalist purging of privacy depended. On the one hand, this might have heightened the minimalist public's awareness of itself as such (especially given the further deemphasis of visual experience). On the other hand, unlike the minimalists' audience, Acconci's and Burden's became public in disquieting circumstances, in which their roles were unclear, and which, in dismantling fantasy *as* private, held the democratizing claims of publicness in suspension. What we see in these early works, then, is something that develops into a curious ethos in the trajectory described in this book: performance art at once registering the possibility that the audience might be constituted as a new group formation, and holding at bay any such group formation that might express like-mindedness.

Acconci

“PUBLIC SPACE IS WISHFUL THINKING.”



f the four artists examined in this book, Acconci is the only one with any avowed interest in psychology, and his is the work that has been discussed at most length in terms of the construction of subjectivity. Much of this discussion has been productive, nonetheless the psychology that Acconci was interested in, for instance the work of Erving Goffman and Kurt Lewin, can be classified as social psychology: while he was doing performance art, Acconci was certainly dealing with the relations between external conditions and subjectivity. But emphasis needs to be placed on subjectivity as an effect of those conditions, as well as on the ways in which those relations are not transparent, so that subjectivity exceeds its conditions. Chief among these conditions, in Acconci's work, were the categories of public and private. Acconci repeatedly and relentlessly undid the opposition between these categories, or conditions. As such, the reimagining of the audience of Acconci's performance work saw the continual undermining of any stable position, as if this transformation were permanently in process.

Seedbed, for instance, posed the emergence of subjectivity as a public effect over the unstable ground of a space that had ceased, by virtue of Acconci's intervention, to be comfortably distinguishable as either public or private. Typically, subjective interiority is mapped onto the private realm: the subject formed in private goes out into the public to act. This is a model, as political philosopher Carol Pateman argues, which assumes that public acts will illuminate the private realm, and in fact bestow meaning upon it. Public legitimates private. Historically, this has been a gendered model, one that associates men with the public realm and women with the private, so that women's very existence, in the terms of the model, and specifically their labor, is illuminated, given meaning and value, in relation to the public activities of

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Vito Acconci, *Following Piece*, 1969.

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men. In relation to this, in *The Sexual Contract*, Pateman observes that, for instance, “a (house)wife remains in the private domestic sphere, but the unequal relations of domestic life are ‘naturally so’ and thus do not detract from the universal equality of the public world.”¹ “The public sphere,” in other words, “is always assumed to throw light onto the private sphere, rather than vice versa,” whereas, “on the contrary, an understanding of modern patriarchy requires that the employment contract is illuminated by the structure of domestic relations.”² Similarly, philosopher Moira Gatens argues that the public sphere has developed “in a manner which assumes that its occupants have a male body. Specifically, it is a sphere that does not concern itself with reproduction but with production. It does not concern itself with (private) domestic labour but with (social) wage-labour.”³ Elsewhere, Gatens also argues that the “difficulty of disentangling women’s subjectivity from the private sphere—even *conceptually*—can be accounted for by this intricate and extensive cross-referencing of the private sphere with the body, passions and nature.”⁴ Acconci, however, may be seen to disturb both the usual channels of legitimation and this system of cross-referencing, to the extent that he introduces his own, male, body, into public realms, as desiring, unstable, vulnerable, etc. In fact one might point to repeated instances of self-abjection in Acconci’s work, which speak to the recognition of limitations in conceptions of publicness.

Not only in the classic instance of *Seedbed*, but in much of his performance work, Acconci shuttled between public and private in such a way as to call into question conventional circuits for the legitimation of artistic subjectivity. And if the status of the artist was uncertain in Acconci’s post-minimal realm, this went to the equally unclear role of the audience: by tying his investigations of public/private relations to processes of legitimation—most pointedly, in *Claim*—Acconci demonstrated (even hypostatized) the paralysis of an audience that he could not redefine as a public, however desirable that might have been.

Between 1969 and 1973, Acconci repeatedly staged the interpenetration of public and private, characteristically by collapsing, or doubling, the supposedly public or private functions of different spaces. This is especially clear in a trio of works from 1970, *Room Piece*, *Step*

Piece, and *Service Area*. *Room Piece*, for instance, took place over three weekends in January 1970: “Each weekend, the movable contents of one section of my apartment (Christopher Street) are relocated at the gallery (West 80th Street). Whenever I need something that has been relocated at the gallery, I go there to get it; anything taken out of the gallery is returned when I have finished using it.”⁵ The private interior from which subjectivity might have been seen to issue was rendered partly public, transplanted to the gallery, which was turned into a branch of Acconci’s domestic space. Further, the two spaces, each with doubled functions, were connected by the city’s public transport network (here Acconci exaggerated aspects of the standard condition of the commuter). The activities of Acconci, as the subject traversing this doubly expanded zone—more room at home, more time required to move around—were also doubled: domestic life and performance became simultaneous.

As long as the public was not invited into the Christopher Street apartment in *Room Piece*, however, this self-doubling was not complete. In *Step Piece*, performed that February and in April, July, and November the same year, the apartment was at least notionally open to the public:

An 18-inch stool is set up in my apartment and used as a step.

Each morning, during the designated months, I step up and down the stool at the rate of 30 steps a minute. Each day, I step up and down until I can’t go on and I’m forced to stop. . . .

(Announcements are sent out, inviting the public to come see the activity, in my apartment, any day during the designated months. At the end of each month’s activity, a progress-report is sent out to the public.)⁶

Here Acconci collapsed the public space of exhibition onto the usually private space of production. But as in *Room Piece*, this was not the studio but his home, the interior site of the production of the self, so he also, comically, substituted the body that he was building up in his apartment for the aesthetic object that might have been produced in the studio. The bureaucratically-styled “progress-reports,” released to a selected public, condensed institutional functions even further, as the exhibition space/studio/home became the source of its own pub-

licity (in the sense of a press release, for instance). At the same time, however, no matter how layered the space was, any physical changes produced by the activity that was framed there took place in the same body, Acconci's, as it moved through the room. Acconci's description even implies that body and space might become coterminous: "I can build myself *into* the space as I build myself up."⁷

Service Area, Acconci's contribution to the exhibition *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (June–September 1970), further developed the institutional aspects of *Room Piece* and *Step Piece*. For the duration of the exhibition, Acconci had his mail forwarded to the museum.⁸ As in *Room Piece*, performance and daily life became simultaneous, but this time they were explicitly reliant on two bureaucratic institutions, the privately owned public museum and the postal service, the latter in 1970 still a federal agency. Where in *Step Piece* the apartment/studio was notionally turned into the exhibition space, in this instance, the transformation of Acconci's domestic space was limited to the transplantation of the function of the mail box, and perhaps the lobby of the apartment building. This was telling, however, as it set up a series of equivalences, between the artist, his correspondents, the mail carriers and the museum guards (or, independent contractors, public functionaries, and private employees), insofar as they were all necessary to the performance of the piece.

The effect of the epistolary element of *Step Piece* was refined too. Unlike the progress-reports, correspondence sent to Acconci was not dependent on his own self-assessment, but was both received and proffered by Acconci as a form of self-identification at once public and private. Acconci also sharpened the tension between this blurring of the distinction between public and private and a notional private interiority, seen in his distinguishing himself from the other participants by his intention (or, by his sole awareness of the whole piece): "The piece is performed unawares by the postal service and by the senders of the mail; I perform the piece, intentionally, by going to the museum to pick up my mail."⁹ And the museum guards, whose usual service was to protect works of art, were put to work guarding the content of Acconci's mail (viewers could see the mail, whether it was a personal letter or a bill from a public utility, but not read it).¹⁰ Aesthetic objects in public art museums, especially in museums of mod-

ern art, which tend not to house objects of religious or ritual purpose, have served to emblemize a form of bourgeois subjectivity bound to private property and therefore dependent on a clear distinction between public and private (especially when the distinction is not always clear with respect to property itself). Art has epitomized subjective expression that issues from a private interior into the public sphere, often regardless of its content. Having emphasized the museum's status as a site in which private, public, and state interests intersected and merged, it is fitting that Acconci should have ironized the form of subjectivity that the museum has historically supported. For despite his reservation of intention, *Service Area* was a work that could not be produced by a solitary, private subject, and though it served to identify Acconci, it was a work to which content was delivered, unwittingly, and in the case of junk mail somewhat arbitrarily, from outside.

More than thirty years later, when the understanding that we live in a mass media society has become banal (or second nature), the interpenetration of public and private that Acconci demonstrated may seem like a given.¹¹ But between 1969 and 1973 there was significant unrest along the borders of the public and the private. Claims to the public realm were being made and defended, by civil rights activists, protesters against the Vietnam War, feminists, gay rights activists, and by their various opponents. In retrospect, at least, the categories themselves seem to have become public as categories. In looking back at Acconci's work, not only does the distinction between public and private emerge as a fiction, but its ideological character becomes evident, particularly in the paradoxical tenacity of private subjectivity.¹² For while, as I will argue, Acconci tried to leave the private self behind, tension was generated in his early work by his being repelled by privacy but also drawn toward it.

In this context, even though it might not have been readable as such at the time, Acconci's investigation of the relations between public and private may be seen to have shared concerns with contemporary feminist efforts to establish the personal as political. This concern might not have been readable, in part, because of the apparently contradictory sexism of some of Acconci's works in this period. Most notoriously, perhaps, in *Broadjump 71* (May 1971), Acconci per-

formed a standing broadjump, before the exhibition began, setting a challenge to viewers to better his attempt. The prize for each successful contestant, in this “jump for a broad” (held in the same Atlantic City convention center as the Miss America pageant), was to spend two hours with his—but presumably also her—choice of one of two women then both living with Acconci. Part of the experiment for Acconci was to “challenge each girl, convince her to take part,” and to “make myself believe I was in the position to give a girl away.”¹³ Linker suggests that although “Acconci’s early art registers the masculinist abuses of the heroic modern self, the displacement of that self within the social surround offers a counter to its domination.”¹⁴ However, this negates both the characteristic ambivalence of Acconci’s relation to the self’s social surrounds, and its humor. The work may be hard to defend, but given the site, it might be possible to detect at least a hint of parody in the nakedness with which it presented the contest between men over women.

More than thirty years later, as well, the standard interpretation of Acconci’s diverse early activities is that they represent a series of tests of the self and its limits. According to Linker, for instance, throughout his career Acconci has “repeatedly attempted to ‘stage’ his self in his work, detaching and distancing himself from his being, so as to secure its definition.” It might be noted, here, however, that “detachment” and “distance” connote what seems already to have been, for Acconci, a problematic idea of “critical distance,” hence the often obsessional quality of his activities, the repeated staging of the very difficulty of obtaining any such distance: a difficulty that extended to Acconci’s audience, as well.¹⁵ For Linker, his work “replicates” the shift from modernism to postmodernism, that is, the shift “from a centered to a decentered subject”: “from a self viewed as controlling, individual, and indivisible to one that is fragmented and dispersed within the social codes that construct its momentary configurations.”¹⁶

Acconci’s work, in this account, deals with the social construction of the postmodern self. His work is seen to be concerned with how the self comes to be, with the problem, broadly, of how to have a postmodern self. But if it is true that Acconci attempted to secure the definition of the self, he did so in order to be able to get away from it. In *Seedbed*, for instance, semen functioned as an index and ironic

guarantee of interiority: “I’ve left something there, outside, that used to be here, inside.”¹⁷ Once this evidence (however obviously and hopelessly inconclusive) of the self was secure, Acconci could leave. As he concluded in his characteristically blankly humorous notes on the work, “I can move with an easy mind—what’s left behind is safe, in storage.”¹⁸ To whatever degree Acconci’s work was bound up with the construction of “a self,”¹⁹ he was interested in how not to have one.

Still, positions such as Linker’s have in part been authorized by Acconci’s own commentaries on his work. In particular, critics have interpreted his work in terms of his avowed interest, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the broadly social-psychological theories of Erving Goffman, Edward Hall, and Kurt Lewin.²⁰ By now, however, as Acconci himself has remarked, this interest may have been overemphasized.²¹ Goffman, Hall, and Lewin shared a concern with social interaction, with the ways that individuals performed themselves. But “social,” in their work, carried the sense of describable groups or contexts, far more concrete or empirical situations than “the social” that has come to dominate contemporary discourse on subjectivity. Their influence on Acconci has been overemphasized insofar as it has disguised a leap, from the earlier, more limited sense of the social, to the broad, even amorphous view that characterizes the reception of contemporary social constructionist theory.

Further, if Acconci used performance to contest the model of the subject grounded in the public/private split, it is difficult to see how his early work could have “replicated,” in Linker’s term, a shift from modernism to postmodernism, when the need for the contest suggests that the shift was not yet fully evident, and while not only the terms but the fact of the shift continue to be argued.²² This is because the battle is ideological: whatever the historical conditions for the scales having dropped from our eyes, if it is true, now, that the self is socially constructed—if, in fact, it is in the nature of selves to be so constructed—then it must have been true in 1969, or whenever. This leads to the anachronistic logic of Linker’s argument, in which Acconci’s work is invoked to confirm something that at least in 1969 had not been fully articulated.

The notion of postmodern social construction of subjectivity that

Linker invokes is grounded, at least in part, in the feminist contention that gender is a social construct.²³ Infants, that is, are made into girls or boys, their physical attributes are assigned to preexistent social categories. However, to say that the self is socially constructed is too often to do little more than identify a broad intellectual position or strategic alignment. This is understandable, for “the social” is a very large abstraction: living inside it, we never experience it as such.²⁴ The principle discourses on the self each theorize crucial aspects of experience, but none of them is or can be all-encompassing. At the risk of being reductive, in psychoanalysis, the fundamental moment in the construction of subjectivity is entry into the social order via the Oedipus complex (Freud; even taking into account significant modifications of the basic scheme, such as those suggested by Melanie Klein); or else entry into language (Lacan). But to equate the social with the family or even language would be to go beyond psychoanalysis, especially when the fundamental datum of psychoanalysis is that the same conditions produce infinitely variable effects in subjectivity. Even if the Oedipal triangle were seen to be profoundly affected by the introduction of a television into every home (mommy-daddy-me-TV), it would remain facile to equate the social with the media.²⁵ It may well be true that selves are formed in and by patriarchy, legal systems, and systems of representation, and that the social that constructs us is determined by capital’s need to reproduce labor, or by processes of objectification and commodification. Nevertheless, Acconci’s work demonstrates considerable skepticism about the transparency of relations between external conditions and subjective states: Acconci remarked that “an expression like state of mind is quite antithetical to me, because I just don’t believe in such a thing.”²⁶ *Seedbed*, in which desire was subjected to conditions that were at once self-generated (Acconci set up the situation) and external (the situation generated its own contingencies), serves to illustrate this skepticism.

Relatedly, in one of his earliest important works, *Following Piece* (October 1969), Acconci established the characteristic tendency of his early work to present the self’s relation to the social as mediated, or limited, by the experience of the categories of public and private. In *Following Piece*, Acconci submitted his activity to a “daily scheme”:

“choosing a person at random, in the street, any location; following him wherever he goes, however long or far he travels (the activity ends when he enters a private place—his home, office, etc.).”²⁷

After the formulation of the scheme, Acconci’s experience was subjected to something outside itself: “I let my control be taken away—I’m dependent on the other person. . . . My positional value counts here, not my individual characteristics.”²⁸ The system in which Acconci was positioned was explicitly public, limited by the other person’s entry into a private place, but it was also secretly public, as the other people did not know they were being followed. If the approach to the categories of public and private was not yet as nuanced in *Following Piece* as it would become in subsequent works, the categories were not allowed to remain natural: secrecy and publicness are normally opposed, so Acconci’s secretly public performance already presented a conundrum. The displacement of his own habitual occupation of public space by conforming his behavior to that of another subject, which Acconci glossed as a way “to step out of myself,”²⁹ reversed the polarity of the relations of watching and being watched apparently established by the work’s format. Acconci as the subject of *Following Piece* appears as a failed spy,³⁰ restricted to public places: “‘on the street,’ homeless”;³¹ *Following Piece*, that is, raised the question of the public or private location of subjectivity, which again points to Acconci’s interest in the relations between interior states and external conditions. Furthermore, the way that entrances into private spaces curtailed Acconci’s activity begins to suggest the ideological function of public and private in ordering experience.

The level of generality of the social construction of the self is at odds with the stubborn empiricism of Acconci’s early work, in which the social was approached via investigations of public and private experience. This makes sense, insofar as the distinction between public and private is immediately accessible, at least at first glance and at a mundane level. Less abstract than the social, public and private are experienced as basic principles of life in society, delineating spaces (inside from outside, home and studio from gallery and museum), and subjects (individual from individual, individual from group). But even though the dichotomy of public and private may not hold up to examination, it remains fundamental to the organization of the social, far

beyond the quotidian. As Pateman argues, the distinction between public and private is necessary to the division between domestic and other forms of labor, such that those other forms are valued as work, upon which valuation both masculine privilege within patriarchy and the reproduction of labor within capital depend. The construction of the male worker “presupposes that he is a man who has a woman, a (house)wife, to take care of his daily needs. The private and public spheres of civil society are separate, reflecting the natural order of sexual difference, and inseparable, incapable of being understood in isolation from each other.” And the “meaning of ‘work’ depends on the (repressed) connection between the private and civil spheres.”³²

Following from its necessity to that division of labor, the public/private split helps to determine the form of family life within patriarchy upon which rest psychoanalysis’s versions of the social construction of the subject. And, as urban theorist Rosalyn Deutsche argues, in allowing difference and conflict to be bracketed within the private, the distinction between public and private allows for a vision of the social as coherent and unified. In *Evictions*, Deutsche tracks the rhetorical use of “the public,” “whether attached to art, space, or any number of other objects, ideas, and practices,” as one of the “means of giving the uneven development of New York democratic legitimacy.”³³ But this “public,” beloved of real estate developers and city bureaucracies, actually serves to justify the use of public space by certain groups and the exclusion of others: “Because ‘the public’ is defined either as a unity or, what amounts to the same thing, as a field composed of essential differences, dilemmas plaguing the use of public spaces can be attributed to the inevitable disruptions attendant on the need to harmonize the ‘natural’ differences and diverse interests characteristic of any society.”³⁴ And “exclusions enacted to homogenize public space by expelling specific differences are dismissed as necessary to restore social harmony.”³⁵ Drawing on Kluge and Negt’s critique of Habermas’s theory of the public sphere in *Public Sphere and Experience*, Deutsche argues that this dismissal, effectively a repression of debate,

originates in the strict demarcation drawn in bourgeois society between the public and private realms. Because economic gain, protected from public accountability by its seclusion within the private

domain, actually depends on publicly provided conditions, the bourgeois public sphere was instituted as a means for private interests to control public activity. But since capitalism requires the preservation of the illusion that an absolute boundary divides the public and private realms, the contradictions that gave birth to the public sphere are also perpetuated and “reconciled” in its operations.³⁶

Acconci enforced the distinction between public and private himself in *Following Piece*, as if to emphasize the necessity of the privacy that he only began to encroach upon. For to look at the work’s documentation now is to have one’s curiosity piqued by the private entrances shutting Acconci out. To have to stop at the door is frustrating. This is to encounter the appeal of the model of the subject posited on the distinction between public and private, a tenacious appeal that derives in part from the lack of alternatives: without it, the subject is, as *Following Piece* suggests, homeless.³⁷ In the face of the actual interpenetration of public and private, that is, this tenacity is underscored by terror, whether it is the terror of oblivion or, as Acconci’s desire to step outside himself might imply, freedom. So to struggle, as Acconci did, with the paradox of subjectivity that emerges in his early work, is to struggle with the ideological functions of the self.

In *Following Piece*, Acconci repeatedly subjected the self to another person (and to the patterning of those others’ behavior in terms of public and private). This subjection opens another of the tendencies evident in Acconci’s attempts, essentially, to be rid of the self, that is, a strategy of concentration. A number of works “that involved concentration on another element to such an extent that I almost became that other element”³⁸ have an almost alchemical cast, as though they would literally produce a concentrate of self, an essence or core that operated outside of ideology: the poignancy of such works lying between their doggedness and their implausibility. *Second Hand* (January 1971) exemplifies this. As part of a program of three simultaneous performances at Reese Palley Gallery, New York (the others were by Terry Fox and Dennis Oppenheim), Acconci placed a clock on the wall of an alcove and for one hour, with his back to the viewers, concentrated exclusively on the second hand, moving in a circle at the same rate. “Enclosed in concentration,” Acconci sought to narrow the self

down to the point of its relation to the clock, so that he would vanish, “disappear into the clock.” The paradoxical effect of this accentuation of privacy, this “turn inward” that made him “a margin for the public space” of the gallery, was to be a “turn outward.” The premise seems to have been that the contraction of the self into a singular element would cause it to turn inside out: “in becoming the clock I can time the other performances—be a measure for the other performances (disperse myself—becoming time—providing, confirming the ground for the other performances).”³⁹

“In becoming the clock,” marking public time (however imprecisely, as Acconci’s shuffling feet, wrinkling the canvas on the floor, seem not to have matched the regularity of the clock’s hands), the disappearing self became a function of the program of performances. Needless to say, Acconci did not actually become the clock. But the deliberately naive character of the statement indicates the empirical, experimental quality of Acconci’s work on or with the self: he would do a particular thing, in a particular place, for a set length of time, under certain conditions. In this case, he subjected the self to the clock, so that his experience was bound to it, and for the duration of the performance he could no longer readily distinguish himself from it. This was a parodic Taylorization of the self, which did not produce anything.⁴⁰ At the same time, in turning himself into a measure for the other performances, Acconci again blurred the difference between the public and private aspects of the self. For the clock is the instrument most basic to the organization of time into public and private blocks (most familiarly, the nine-to-five work day), hence to the regulation of behavior into public and private modes that ensues.

The statement may also be considered as a metaphorical gloss on the performance, commenting on its self-hypnotic quality and the way it was tied to the specific context of the gallery program. In this sense, “in becoming the clock” indicates a dilemma of agency which, while Acconci often presented it comically, was fundamental to his attempts to objectify the self, in order to put it aside. The duration of the performance was a preestablished condition. Acconci, therefore, set the terms for the disappearance of his own self. So it is not coincidental that “in becoming the clock” is followed by “I”: “In becoming the clock I . . . disperse myself.” This “I” that acts upon itself, that

decides in advance how it will act upon itself, represents again the residue of privacy, of interiority, that Acconci contended with throughout his early work. In *Second Hand*, at least implicitly, the contention involved disturbing normal, “productive” relations of public and private.

Still, it is not clear from Acconci’s example exactly which elements of subjectivity might persist, beyond public and private. Acconci addressed this in a series of contradictory observations about *See Through* (October 1969), a five-minute Super 8 film in which the grammatical relationship of *Second Hand* was made literal, as he punched a mirror until it broke, and his reflected image shattered “This is a way to get rid of myself. No, this is a way to get rid of an image and so be able to stand on my own. No, this is a way to get rid of a necessary support. No, this is a way to get rid of a nagging shadow. No, this is a way to get out of a closed circle and so have room to move. No, this is a way to get rid of deep space, so that I have to bang my head against the wall.”⁴¹ Acconci tried to break through the private self that was held in the narcissistic embrace of the mirror, to see what else there might be, or to find, behind the mirror, as it were, some core of the self: “get through to me.”⁴² But the attempt ended up with the artist, notionally at least, banging his head against the wall in a classic gesture of frustration. Instead of the hypothetical moment of truth, or terror, of freedom from the self or of an encounter with some unmediated essence, there was Acconci, comically floundering before the camera.

The comic aspect of Acconci’s work derives in part from the ludicrous quality of the situations that he set up and pursued so earnestly.⁴³ It also derives from the contrast between the dogged empiricism of these attempts to abandon familiar or conventional models of the self, and the characteristic, warts-and-all presentation of his own body. For the specificity of Acconci’s presence might suggest that the body is a given, a consistent ground for subjectivity that is impossible to be rid of, for all its failings (a kind of Beckettian burden). Much of the interest and pathos of Acconci’s work derives from the shifting between body-as-burden and self-in-flux, which accompanies his shuttling between public and private. To some extent, of course, the body is mutable, too. The body’s capacities can be altered, but not without affecting subjectivity, as Acconci’s quirky anticipation of gym

culture in *Step Piece* suggests. *Step Piece* was in part a study of cause and effect, a record of changes in Acconci's physical status under controlled conditions. But the intentional, rationalistic, conceptual aspect of the work was grounded in Acconci's experience of his own body, while the function of the space was doubled, public and private. So the work effected a post-Cartesian binding together of both conceptual and perceptual, and public and private, in the apparently site-specific development of a subject.

Acconci addressed the body's capacities in other works as well, typically by placing them under stress. But at the same time, unavoidably, in the dual sense of emphasizing and putting pressure on, he also stressed his own presence. In each of three *Adaptation Studies* (June 1970), for instance, Acconci was filmed subjecting himself to a different form of physical stress. *Blindfolded Catching* saw Acconci, blindfolded and with his back to a wall, attempting to catch a rubber ball that was repeatedly thrown at him. If this was an absurdly inefficient way to improve his reflexes, perhaps what was being tested was Acconci's capacity for punishment; it provides an image of the artist as a target, in the place of the art object. For *Hand and Mouth*, Acconci repeatedly stuffed his hand into his mouth until he choked and had to release it. But in testing his own gag reflex, Acconci was also invoking and testing the viewer's gag reflex for art, using disgust to link his own experience and the viewer's. Acconci described the third study, *Soap and Eyes*, as follows: "Looking directly at the camera; pouring soapy water into my eyes; blinking and working the soap out—by the end of the film, I can look into the camera again."⁴⁴ Here again was an ironic inversion of the standard encounter with art, as Acconci, looking out from the place of the art object, could not see, only recovering as time ran out for the camera. Acconci glossed this as "looking at looking . . . exhaustion of looking."⁴⁵ What was exhausted, or denied, was the one-to-one, eye-to-eye relationship with the artist that the work initially seems to have promised.

The concerns of the *Adaptation Studies* were concentrated in *Waterways* (July 1971), which examined capacity quite literally. *Waterways* is a twenty-minute videotape, framing Acconci's face below the eyes as he fills his mouth with saliva, "making my face a balloon, until I can't hold anymore—the saliva bursts through my lips." In turn, when

the saliva bursts out, it is caught in Acconci's hands, cupped below his mouth, stored, "just as it was stored in my mouth."⁴⁶ The movement of saliva is a metonym for the body's various circuits of production and distribution, though these are threatened because of the limited volume of the mouth (and, again, the gag reflex) and the cupped hands. It is also an abjectly ironic metaphor both for the artist's productive or creative capacity (apparently limitless, but to what end?), and for the circulation of the art object for which at successive levels both the saliva and the videotape are substitutes.

The body's capacities can be increased (if not indefinitely, as *Waterways* makes clear), the shape of muscles can be changed, reflexes can be trained. Nevertheless, Acconci remains recognizable as Acconci. What these works have in common is that in each case an apparently authentic bodily experience is presented in the place of the art object. This might suggest that the body provides the last habitat for private interiority, that it is an ontological ground for the distinction between public and private. However, in each case the authenticity of the experience is only apparent, as it is simultaneous with its reproduction—as photograph, videotape or film—and entry into representation and its systems of circulation. Rather than confirming the bodily gesture of the self-possessed modernist subject,⁴⁷ in these moments of simultaneous reproduction that slyly confounded the public/private distinction, Acconci contested the authenticity of subjective experience. Here we might consider *Seedbed*, again, as a work underlying which was an exemplary private experience—and, of course, another metaphor for artistic creativity—but a private experience for which we have to take Acconci's word (no one could tell, from the surface of the ramp, whether Acconci was *really* masturbating).

Acconci's exploratory, even ambivalent relation to the body as the supposed ground of authentic experience is seen in *Conversions* (August–September 1971), a seventy-two minute Super 8 film in three parts, in which he tried to turn himself into a woman. Or rather given, again, the simultaneous reproduction of the attempt, he tried to turn himself into a representation of a woman. In *Part I (Light, Reflection, Self-control)*, in a darkened interior (a "withdrawal chamber," in which he withdrew from his own image), Acconci burned the hair off his breast with a candle and massaged it, trying to develop a female



Vito Acconci, *Conversions Part III (Association, Assistance, Dependence)*, 1971.

Second participant: Kathy Dillon, camera: Doug Waterman.

© Acconci Studio.

breast.⁴⁸ *Part II (Insistence, Adaptation, Groundwork, Display)* saw Acconci, naked with his penis tucked between his legs, exercising his “new body” by walking, running, jumping, stretching, kicking, and sitting. Acconci wrote that his performance depended on “an attempt to handle, control, personal information,”⁴⁹ when the only “personal information” in question was the appearance of his penis. *Part III (Association, Assistance, Dependence)*, moved the “new body” toward a public realm of “social activity,” but the social, here, was sharply circumscribed: “a girl kneels behind me: I acquire a female form by inserting, losing, my penis in her mouth: exercising my body in its new stance (social activity—change by means of another person, change by means of the kind of person I am attempting to change into).”⁵⁰

Acconci might be accused of sexism, insofar as he co-opted a feminist idea and demonstrated it at the expense of the woman. It is true that he placed her in an awkward position, not least because it is difficult to imagine that his penis stretched right back between his legs. But at the same time, the final tableau presents Acconci himself

as so ludicrously vulnerable and immobile, clumsily caught, after all, in a version of existing gender roles, that the work points to their intractability. Perhaps it also implies the panic that might follow, for some men, at least, in discovering that they might be released from those roles. And the body, for all that it is mutable, nonetheless remains an impediment. Here, too, it might be noted that while Acconci's work seems to owe a good deal to feminism, in its interest in the social construction of subjectivity and in its unsettling of the categories of public and private, it is certainly not beyond feminist criticism. Arguably, though, Acconci's undermining of particular categories (such as public and private) is an instance of a broader engagement with the very idea of category: in this sense, despite its perhaps ambivalent relation to feminism, Acconci's work might properly be seen as queer.⁵¹

Acconci explored or encountered the resistances of subjectivity to the interpenetration of public and private in the context of an inquiry into the general conditions of art, rather than a particular discipline. Central to Acconci's approach to these general conditions of art was the substitution of his body, or its representation, for the art object. In 1979 Acconci reflected on this as follows:

Those pieces using my own body in '70 started from thinking "What—how can I think of a *generalized art condition*?" It seems like in any kind of art situation, viewer enters exhibition space, viewer heads toward artwork, so viewer is aiming towards artwork. Viewer is treating artwork as a kind of target, so it seems to me that this is a kind of general condition of all art viewing, art experience. Therefore, if that—if that target-making notion is a condition of all art experiencing, could I use that target-making notion as a condition of art doing? So, in other words, could I treat myself as a target, then, in turn, this target-making activity is made available for viewers? Something to target in on, on their own?⁵²

Here Acconci expressly addressed the transformation of the audience, inverting the general conditions that he identified—and, significantly, setting up an equivalence between the artist's and the viewer's roles. Acconci's concern with the general conditions of art was often, as we have seen, a concern with its institutional and spatial parameters.



Vito Acconci, *Claim*, 1971.

© Acconci Studio. Photo: Kathy Dillon

Together with the gesture toward effacing the distinction between artist and viewer, this allows his work to stand as a commentary on the broader social and political category that is defined by the relations between public and private, that is, the public sphere.

On 10 September 1971, Acconci sat on a chair for three hours, blindfolded and armed with two lead pipes and a crowbar, at the foot of a staircase that led from street level to the basement of 93 Grand Street, New York, the loft building out of which *Avalanche* magazine operated.⁵³ *Avalanche* was the main organ of publicity for performance art in the early seventies, and would the following year publish its special Acconci issue, including photographs of *Claim*. A video screen next to the street-level door monitored Acconci's activity. Acconci spoke aloud to himself incessantly: "I'm alone down here . . . I'm alone here in the basement . . . I want to stay alone here . . . I'll stop anyone from coming down the stairs . . . I'm staying alone . . . I have to keep talking . . . I have to believe this . . . I have to talk myself into this . . . I'm alone here. . . ." ⁵⁴ Whenever he sensed someone on the

stairs, he swung the weapons in front of him. Today, this comes to us via Acconci's own script, the video, and photographs taken from the stairs, looking down at him brandishing his weapons in the cramped space below. The work was entitled *Claim*, but what was Acconci's claim?

In one of his own subsequent explications, Acconci refers to himself "claiming the space," and "play[ing] on the notion of sculpture taking—claiming—space."⁵⁵ So we might see *Claim* as exaggerating and extending minimalism's activation of the exhibition space and its implication of the viewer's physical presence (its theatricality). Such an explanation coincides with the view, as well articulated by Acconci as anyone, that "people did performance in order not to do painting and sculpture."⁵⁶ Performance went against "an immediate tradition of art-in-itself,"⁵⁷ that is, the aesthetic autonomy claimed by modernism, and replaced transcendence with a transience tied to a mutable body: "into a world of objects and things, performance let the body loose, like a bull in a china shop."⁵⁸ The work is also an agonistic investigation of the construction of the self in the interaction between artist and viewer. But when *Claim* is examined in the light of a reflection on the relations between public and private that go to form (or deform) the public sphere, considered above all as an environment for discourse, a relation begins to emerge between Acconci's claim to speech, and claims made elsewhere, in the context of the social movements of the time: this was, as Acconci has commented, "the time of demonstrations against the Vietnam War (which appeared to validate the effectiveness of individual and community action against what was called—or called itself—the establishment)."⁵⁹

This is not to suggest for a moment that Acconci pretended to the importance of the claims of the contemporary anti-war movement. Rather, *Claim* might be seen as a parody of the competition between artists for publicity (someone, after all, must have been put out by a whole issue of *Avalanche* being devoted to Acconci). It was a parody of the claim to artistic uniqueness, or to splendid creative isolation, which deflated some of the more grandiose claims habitually made for avant-garde art, so that the performance that might have appeared to make art real, even dangerous, actually and pointedly translated the collapse of the distinction between art and life into an internecine

struggle for art world status, figured as a desperate struggle over useless space (“what could I possibly have wanted with that space?”).⁶⁰ To the extent that *Claim* echoed other, contemporaneous occupations of space (demonstrations, events in Attica), it did so in a farcical way. In this sense, *Claim* pointed to the irresponsibility of attaching too much importance to art world crises. The “crime” on the video monitor was not of the same order as the crime on television. As Acconci later acknowledged of the “real” of performance art, “this ‘real’ was set up, this ‘real’ was for performance’s sake.”⁶¹ At the same time as *Claim* positioned itself cannily astride avant-gardist claims for “realness” that might have been made on its behalf, the transience of Acconci’s presence and the ephemerality of the record of it also had a bearing on the transience and ephemerality—the contingency—of the public record of crises in the “real” world beyond art.

Claim, in fact, represented the artist in a peculiar, unstable relation to the public sphere, by means of its gesture toward a violent intervention in the circulation of publicity. As Acconci has acknowledged, many of his works of the early 1970s “were done specifically for conventional art-exhibition places.”⁶² Such places, especially the art galleries in which Acconci frequently performed, are in general terms neither quite public nor private. They are privately owned places, run for private profit, to which the public may come.⁶³ If performance art was largely unsaleable, in Acconci’s own words, it nevertheless “increased the gallery’s sales by acting as window-dressing and providing publicity.”⁶⁴ *Claim*, however, was not performed in a gallery but in the staircase of the building that housed *Avalanche* magazine, which published extensive written and photographic documentation of performance art, as well as interviews and criticism. To regard this as an exhibition space was already to challenge conventional modes of exhibition. It was to make a claim for the importance of photographic documentation, and, as we have seen throughout Acconci’s work in this period, of the simultaneity of production and reproduction (something already indicated by the video component of the work). Consistent with the blurrings and doublings of disciplinary categories characteristic of Acconci’s work at the time, *Claim* collapsed together the sites of production and publicity.

Linker describes Acconci, seated at the foot of the stairs, as “guard-

ing entry,”⁶⁵ and interpretations of the work focus on Acconci’s apparent hostility. But we should take seriously the work’s claim for the importance of its documentation. We should, that is, take into account that the work anticipated its circulation in documentary form (a given aspect of much performance art, even if one imposed by the requirements of the artistic career, as an institution dependent upon publicity: if the work was to be *completely* ephemeral, there would be no need to photograph or film the work, or to circulate those elements). As I argued in the Introduction, there is a way of thinking about it, as performance art, in a fuller relation to its temporally extended existence as verbal description and photographic documentation: a way that accepts the usual definition of performance art as a time-based form, but with different implications.⁶⁶ For if at the time Acconci appeared to embody mindlessly paranoid violence, in looking at the photographs now of a blindfolded man confined in that small space, he appears as much menaced as menacing. If he was on guard, he was also besieged, vulnerable, and somewhat comical. And to what was he guarding entry? What was he talking himself into? In claiming the basement beneath *Avalanche*, he may have made a claim on access to publicity, and critical legitimation, but this claim was rendered highly ironic by the contrast between its violence and how easy it was to bypass him, that is, by its abject failure as a strategy (there was no need to go by Acconci to get to anywhere except the basement). And if Acconci was claiming a realm for a public self (however pathetic), by virtue of its mere proximity to the magazine, he was also guarding his always paradoxical privacy, in another constricted space like that of *Seedbed*.⁶⁷

“Realm,” however, may be misleading, unless it is allowed to include fantastic and virtual realms.⁶⁸ “Self,” too, has to be regarded cautiously. For in collapsing together the sites of production and publicity in *Claim*, however approximately, Acconci produced a work that was at once sited and siteless. Sited, because it depended for part of its effect on its location and Acconci’s distinctive presence there;⁶⁹ siteless, because it depended and still depends for its temporally extended effect on the simultaneous dispersal of that time, place, and presence, in the circuits of reproduction and distribution, publicity and legitimation. This remains the case even if that dispersal was

largely theoretical, or gestural, because the relatively small and familiar audience of such publications meant that the effects of the publicity that *Avalanche* facilitated were largely predictable.⁷⁰ Largely theoretical, and largely predictable, but not entirely: the reactions of the audience, its judgments of taste, must not only have varied but must have become public in interactions which were not completely predetermined.⁷¹ And to the extent that the dispersal was not predictable, the doubling of sited and siteless means that both the public sphere and its subjects have a virtual quality. This speaks further to the unstable position of Acconci's audience, when the work seems at once to call for a public, at the same time as it stymies its formation.

Claim's engagement with the dilemma of legitimation in a public sphere that is always elsewhere sheds some light not only on the category, but on contemporary political events as well. For the public sphere, at least ideally, in its bourgeois liberal guise, is where legitimation claims are assessed and agreed upon. This is what it is for, as art historian and urban theorist Rosalyn Deutsche argues: "what is recognized in public space is the legitimacy of debate about what is legitimate and what is illegitimate."⁷² Such debate occurs, again ideally, in the working out of claims and counter-claims in rational-critical debate, integral to which is the publication and publicization of those claims. Acconci could not and did not seek the authority of painting and sculpture, for performance art "was a way to intrude, in the middle of a single-belief system, the swarm of multiple gods."⁷³ But if performance art was to pry loose painting and sculpture's grip on legitimacy, if it was, to some extent and in some quarters, to delegitimize traditional or orthodox aesthetic judgments, then it had to authorize itself, to borrow a famous phrase, by other criteria.⁷⁴

Claim lit from beneath the necessarily double movement of legitimation and delegitimation. Acconci was in an awkward position, but in a sense he was not alone. Not only was this the period of demonstrations against the Vietnam War, it was also the time of a series of attempts by prisoners to organize prison reform, sometimes taking the form of prison revolts, as at Attica, or strikes. The women's liberation movement was gaining momentum. Attempts were being made to delegitimize existing authority, including the authority of the state, on a broad scale.

Three years before *Claim*, for instance, the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago exploded into the infamous and well-televised “police riot” after a proposed anti-war platform plank was defeated. President Lyndon B. Johnson had already found it necessary to remove himself from a reelection bid if he was to direct his energy toward ending the war. The Democratic Party, in other words, was unable either to read or assimilate the position of the anti-war movement, perhaps because its rhetoric derived not only from the counter-culture but also, via Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from the Civil Rights movement (and from an oppositional form of Christianity). Within a two-party system, this meant that the anti-war movement became legible in relation to the overarching legitimating institution of the electoral system chiefly as a social pathology.⁷⁵ The Republican Party was able to attack the Democrats on the grounds that they were unable to contain violently radical elements, and while Nixon also promised to end the war (a promise “kept” in the massive expansion of bombing), the heart of his successful election campaign was “law and order.” Lacking a firm institutional ground, the anti-war movement subsequently faced the daunting, double task of forcing and holding open a public arena, and at the same time translating the contest that took place there into a legible exchange of claim and counter-claim. Tragically, it was aided in this task by rising body counts, not only in Vietnam and Cambodia, but in Ohio, at Kent State. The movement had to insinuate its own legitimacy, distancing itself from the possibility of accusations of social pathology and overcoming party political intransigence by amassing even more widespread, “mainstream,” public favor.

Within Western democratic states, at least, demonstrations may produce what is often an all too evanescent solidarity; it is possible that they allow for the formation of publics, and they may certainly be a way of publicizing opinion and ultimately affecting the policy deliberations of the state. But if demonstrations set up an arena between the private realm and the state, what takes place there is not the mediation characteristic of the public sphere. Their success depends not only on the force of the better argument, but on the force of numbers and, at least since the seventies, on the force and kind of mass media coverage they attract.⁷⁶ They depend on the way in which

they intervene in the circulation of publicity. Demonstrations provide both the euphoria of solidarity and shared opinion, and anxiety about its suppression, instrumentalization, or entropy. Demonstrations on the scale of those against the Vietnam War are in democratic states something of a last resort (when they have not already been reduced to the status of a tame carnival).⁷⁷ Because of this, and because, even so, they cannot escape the orbit of mass media publicity, they point to the transformation of, and the loss of faith in, the ideal of a public sphere in which legitimating consensus is reached on the basis of a shared version of rationality.

In the terms of the art world, Acconci's *Claim* enacted this legitimization crisis in miniature. If there was widespread anxiety about existing institutions of political legitimation, there was also anxiety about existing institutions of aesthetic legitimation, which might have been justified on the paradoxical ground that Acconci himself had in 1971 already exhibited his work at the Museum of Modern Art. The artist, who performs in the street in order neither to paint nor sculpt, finds himself authorized to do so by and in the existing legitimating institution (particularly of modern art), an institution that has roots in the bourgeois public sphere. Has he mistaken the character of his own gesture? Or has the institution reevaluated its criteria of judgment? Or are its criteria so little concerned with the content of works of art that almost anything can be rendered legitimate by them? Is the authority of Acconci's or anyone else's work entirely contextual, entirely at the service of the institution?

Here is an anxiety that might look at first instance like an anxiety about the location of subjectivity. Ultimately, though, it is better described as an ethical anxiety, fundamentally concerned with the location of a public realm in which to speak and be heard (and so an anxiety with implications for both artist and audience), while situating art world crises in relation to larger and more important ones. If the artist was exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art, or a Soho gallery, or a cutting-edge publication, was he or was he not being heard? Could he be heard within the institution; could he be heard without it? In *Claim*, Acconci brought that anxiety to a head in the narrowest confines of art, jabbering to himself that he must believe in what he was doing—believe that what he was doing was legitimate—and be prepared to de-

fend that belief violently. In the context of my argument that Acconci typically collapsed, doubled, and shuttled between public and private realms, with the effect of undermining conventional circuits of legitimation, this resort to violence—and its ridiculousness and utter futility—makes *Claim* a crucial work. It emphasizes the importance of legitimation as an issue for Acconci and (more broadly) the lengths to which he would go to ferret out and reveal it as a crisis bound up with the relations between public and private.

Whether we are discussing the legitimation of foreign policy or of an avant-garde art practice, the problem that produced this anxiety was and remains basically the same. The authority of the new rests on the delegitimation or at least partial delegitimation of the old, but legitimation cannot take place in a vacuum, and requires some relation to existing institutions. Even the most negative relation must be legible as such. This seems to be the case, even though consumerism has made *seasonal* delegitimation its fundamental strategy, so that thinking in familiar dichotomies such as complicit/critical and legitimate/illegitimate may be unable to go beyond a chronic ambivalence. It is appropriate that in reflecting on his early work, Acconci should have referred to Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool*, a film about the 1968 Democratic Convention that mixes fiction with documentary footage:⁷⁸

at one point, during the filming of a riot, you can hear the voice of the camera-person off-screen: "Look out, Wexler," he is shouting, "This is real!" Performance of the 70s acted as if it was real. . . . But the belief couldn't hold up, the facts showed the theory for the wishful thinking it was. . . . Performance of the 70s was the establishment of crisis moments, an Aladdin's lamp meant to rub the real into existence.⁷⁹

Elsewhere, he has commented on the somewhat contradictory status of the artist at the time of the anti-war demonstrations and of "the breakdown of the institution, in the form of specialization, into interdisciplinary studies: something for everybody":

On the one hand, the artist of that time found himself/herself in a grandiose position (this is art because I say it is); I can expand the boundaries of art by bringing into it that which, outside the realm

of art, breaks the boundaries of convention and law. On the other hand, the artist of this time, coming out of an immediate tradition of art-in-itself, and finding himself/herself out in the street, could function on the street only as an outsider, an alien.⁸⁰

If Acconci's version of taking art to the streets was admittedly, in retrospect, naive, his work of the period is nonetheless telling about the status, or predicament, of the artist as an agent in a structurally transformed public sphere riven by crisis. On naiveté, he has remarked: "We saw the gallery (we wanted to see the gallery) as an analogue of the street; our model was the New York gallery, like 420 West Broadway, where—rather than having just one gallery as a destination—you walked from floor to floor, you meandered through five floors. The gallery, like the street, was not a node you stopped at but a circulation route that you passed through; going to galleries was like window-shopping." However: "Seeing the gallery as a street was a formalization, or a self-blindness. The building-full-of-galleries should have been seen, more sharply, as the analogue or representation of the convention center or the shopping mall."⁸¹ Acconci's references to convention center and shopping mall recognize, in retrospect, the space in which he worked at that time as the deformation of an idealized public realm. What I described earlier as an ethical anxiety then recurs as an ethical moment of truth-telling: the gesture toward breaking down barriers between artist and audience must remain at the level of gesture because, in such a deformed realm, there is no common platform where a public might emerge as such. Hence, the gesture is accompanied in *Claim* by reference to violence, as much the coin of discourse as any rationality.

Acconci persistently, repeatedly attempted to disperse the self, to render it simultaneous with its circulation as representation. His very persistence and repetition suggest that subjects may never experience themselves as such, given their participation in a virtual public realm. But at the same time, Acconci's farcically desperate and simultaneously videotaped attempt in *Claim*, to locate the self and defend its space, suggests that the model of the subject derived from the bourgeois public sphere survives, in the drive—however mad it has become, however emptied out or dislocated the "I" that speaks—to say

that this space is *mine*. Here, a maniacally self-legitimizing artistic subjectivity appears as an effect of a deformed public sphere; no wonder, then, that the transformation of the audience was stymied.

No wonder, perhaps, either, that driven by his discomfort with the cult of celebrity he was attracting,⁸² in 1974 Acconci made a major career shift, abandoning performance for installation works, in which the trace of performance or the performer's body that remained was Acconci's taped voice. Many of these works made explicit the attempt to organize the audience, and its failure. In a central work from this immediate post-performance period, *Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway)*, of 1976 (referred to briefly in the Introduction), Acconci's voice (and others') called to order a "town meeting," while at the same time a competing soundtrack suggested a game of musical chairs, all around a long table that ran through the center of the Sonnabend Gallery. So the gesture toward revisioning the audience after the model of a democratic polis recognized the exclusive nature of the "town meeting," and coexisted with, if it wasn't undercut by, the lure of the street: the table extended out of the window, to hang over West Broadway like a diving board from which one might make a dangerous plunge back into the real life outside. Here, it is the removal of all but the vocal trace of the artist's presence from the space of performance that makes evident the audience's role in determining its own status, or preference, in choosing between a stylized form of civility, or the hurly-burly outside. It seems clear that Acconci was drawn toward the latter, or anyway acknowledged its gravity.

Burden

“I’D SET IT UP BY TELLING A BUNCH OF PEOPLE,
AND THAT WOULD MAKE IT HAPPEN.”



Shoot

F Space: November 19, 1971

At 7:45 p.m. I was shot in the left arm by a friend. The bullet was a copper jacket 22 long rifle. My friend was standing about fifteen feet from me.

In Chapter 2, we saw Acconci disturb the relations between public and private, often along an axis of property ownership. He put his personal property in the public space of the gallery in *Room Piece*; he exercised “his” sexual fantasies in *Seedbed*, in a public room that he rather made his own, and in *Claim* he staged the defense of a more or less useless corner of someone else’s private space as a public act. In claiming these spaces in the course of art, Acconci undertook a parodic deformation of the property owner’s access to public legitimation, and of the artist’s claim to an equivalently public legitimation. Particularly in *Claim*, he enacted a brute parody of any recourse to idealized means of legitimation; the force of the better argument was reduced to the blind swinging of a lead pipe. The strongest argument for this is that it exposed the violence underlying ideal conceptions of the public as a realm of legitimation, and the pathological contortions of subjectivity due to the persistence of such conceptions. In this connection, Acconci begins to suggest something developed further in Burden’s and especially Abramović’s and Hsieh’s work, that is, the miming of a position something like that of Agamben’s *homo sacer*, the figure who straddles the limits of legitimating social formations, always at once part and not part of that formation.

Burden’s performance work quickly reached a higher pitch of physical violence than Acconci’s, and there may always have been a tendency simply to assign it to a pathological state. However, though Burden’s work may seem less systematic than Acconci’s exhaustive research into the spatial and subjective delineations of public and private, there is in Burden’s work, as well, the negative inference of an ideal public realm. At the same time, Burden’s work is more concerned with smaller-scale group formations, and the immediate responsibilities of initial viewers (and collaborators) are more heavily emphasized,

(previous page)

Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971.

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so that while Burden's work does speak to a mass-mediated, fully public realm, it most pointedly effects the transformation of its audiences into versions of community, which fail their idealization just as badly as Acconci's versions of the public. "Community," here, refers to an ideal of small-scale social organization characterized by face-to-face relations. It fails, as we shall see in this chapter and the next, for various reasons, but principally because it is always already an idealization that suppresses social difference.¹

Characteristically by means of its physical extremity, often coupled with passivity, Burden's work held out the possibility that its audience become a group that might take the opportunity for judgment and decision, but then largely forestalled that possibility. For instance, the very violence of *Shoot* (19 November 1971) seems to have called out for intervention on the part of collaborators or audience members, yet once it was in train, some combination of the expectation of a specialist public, prurient fascination, an anti-moralistic, anti-authoritarian historical milieu, and the brevity of the work prevented any such intervention. *Shoot*, however tendentiously, negatively, or aversively, limned its viewership as an arena of responsibility, of dilemma and decision—as an ethical realm.

Burden's description of this most famous (or infamous) performance consists of three simple sentences: "At 7.45 pm I was shot in the left arm by a friend. The bullet was a copper jacket 22 long rifle. My friend was standing about fifteen feet from me."² The bullet was intended to graze Burden's arm, but caused a more serious wound.³ The performance took place after hours in a gallery space for an invited audience of about ten people, and it is documented by the description and a black and white photograph that shows Burden with his back against a wall and the marksman with rifle raised and his back to the viewer (so that the photographer's view was close to that of the marksman, though not exactly the same). The photograph is so blurred as to suggest a double exposure, as if the photographer, understandably, winced (it may also be a still taken from the short video record of the work, shot by Burden's wife at the time, Barbara Burden, though it is never credited as such).⁴ Another photograph occasionally appears, which is an apparently candid, head-to-knee image of Burden walking from right to left, with his left arm in the

foreground, held slightly away from his body, clearly showing the entry and exit wounds in his upper arm, with a line of blood running down from the entry wound to below his elbow.

Burden is still most closely identified with *Shoot*.⁵ Together with Acconci's *Seedbed*, it stands as one of the signal works of the early seventies. Acconci's work flouted convention, and the verbal component of many of his performances suggested a perverse self-explanatory drive. *Shoot*, by contrast, among Burden's works, is one of a number of benchmarks for apparent physical extremity.⁶ This extremity, coupled with a certain recalcitrance—perhaps what Burden has referred to as its elegance and precision⁷—has left *Shoot* relatively unexplained (or oddly autonomous). It happened, and it did capture people's imagination, but in a slightly aversive form. In this context, *Shoot* now seems to carry a sense of summation or limit, and to continue to issue a demand that we come to terms with it. At the time, as noted in the Introduction, the artist and critic Peter Plagens situated the work in terms of a logic of careerist, avant-gardist escalation, such that in order to get attention in avant-garde circles, artists would have to perform increasingly extreme acts.⁸ And, as I will explain, largely on the basis of the extremity of his work, Burden has over the years been squeezed by critics into a series of categories of subjectivity, as if that would explain the work.

The extremity of *Shoot* is often, perhaps intuitively, taken to be connected with an emphatic artistic presence. If we recall Rosalind Krauss's critical account of modernist relations between medium and subjectivity, in which everything about a painting, for instance, expresses the interior life of the artist, then the apparent substitution of the artist's body for another medium might seem to conform to Mary Kelly's later argument that in performance art we see the return of a (modernist) legitimating artistic presence, and by other means. However, to read Burden's presence in *Shoot* as self-evident in this way is to allow the apparent extremity of the performance to supersede the ways in which his presence was actually complicated and qualified. Without examining in detail the mediation of artistic presence in Burden's early performances, there may be a tendency not to see the ethical questions they pose, questions tied to a critical engagement with minimalism and also to broader than strictly art-historical or art-world concerns.

One of the reasons that Burden remains closely identified with *Shoot* is that by mid-1973, almost two years after the performance, it had become fodder for sensational journalism. In an interview in *Avalanche* in July 1973, Burden commented on the way his public was being shifted away from “art people”: “After that little number in *Esquire*, this guy called from Texas, I’d hear the bleeps on the phone: ‘Bleep. Hi! This is Don Steel on WKRP in Texas, are you Chris Burden?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘Are you the artist?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘What are you going to do next?’”⁹ Exposed to forms of publicity that most artists never have to deal with, Burden became “Chris Burden, the artist who shot himself.” His ability to address spectacular expectations and incorporate them into subsequent performances—often by playing against type, as it were—demonstrates a concern, sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit, with artistic subjectivity as a category, and particularly with its public and institutional dimensions. This concern operates in tension with the idea of a legitimating or authenticating individual presence.

What is more, the identification of Burden with unmediated presence proves oddly inconclusive. He may be best known as “the artist who shot himself”—already an inaccuracy, as he was shot by someone else—but what this knowledge or identification means remains uncertain. This is made clear by the proliferation of subjectivities subsequently assigned to him. Among other things, Burden has been described as a masochist;¹⁰ an avant-garde novitiate;¹¹ a social therapist, an existential populist, a hero, the alter ego of the biblical Samson, a helpless, passive victim;¹² a heroic victim;¹³ an anthropologist;¹⁴ as someone inclined toward the scientist, engineer, inventor, tinkerer;¹⁵ a victim-by-request, the hero of an impossible quest (a modern Don Quixote), a voluntary scapegoat,¹⁶ and a survivalist.¹⁷ Critics have answered the question of why Burden had himself shot, or what it means for Burden to have had himself shot, by referring him to categories of persons, by making claims for what *kind* of person he is. The net effect of all this, however, is that the subjectivity in question in the work remains elusive. Burden’s work tends, instead, to provide a screen onto which subjectivities are projected, a tendency he made explicit in some later performances.¹⁸

Yet *Shoot* itself can be situated relatively comfortably, art-historically speaking, by the conventional method of comparing it, as it is amplified

by secondary materials such as interviews, with antecedent works. This supports the contention that the point of departure for Burden's early performances was minimalism. Given the focus on medium via minimalism's critical relation to it, the proliferation of subjectivities assigned to Burden may in turn be seen as an effect of his work's own relation to medium. It is as if, without recourse to medium, or to an accurate account of Burden's performance work's relation to it—and conceivably by virtue of a residual modernist reflex on the part of its critics—*Shoot* unmoored subjectivity in such a way that categories of person (masochist, therapist, existentialist, scientist, anthropologist, even survivalist) were substituted for the disciplines of art and the category of artist. This is the case *despite* Burden's empirical presence in the work.

There is a tautological aspect to the comparative method that goes to the issue of the institutional validation of art (hence Michael Fried's attack on "literalist *art*" helped confirm it as art). Bracketing that, and without going back as far as dada and futurist performances and attempts to bridge the gap between art and life, the process might begin with Burden's emphasis on the experience of being shot as "interesting." Part of the *Avalanche* interview went as follows:

WILLOUGHBY SHARP: So it doesn't much matter to you whether it's a nick or it goes through your arm?

CHRIS BURDEN: No. It's the idea of being shot at to be hit.

ws: Mmmmm. Why is that interesting?

CB: Well, it's something to experience. How do you know what it feels like to be shot if you don't experience it? *It seems interesting enough to be worth doing.*

ws: Most people don't want to be shot.

CB: Yeah, but everybody watches it on TV every day. America is the big shoot-out country. About fifty per cent of American folklore is about people getting shot.¹⁹

Burden's account resonates with Donald Judd's single requirement that a work of art be interesting, specifically with how far that requirement could be pushed (and if it is still interesting that Burden chose to have himself shot, then one dimension in which interest stretches is temporal). *Shoot* may also be seen to have translated Judd's minimal order, in a manner consistent with other post-minimalist turns away

from the art object, so that it was the experience involved in the production of the art (in this case, the performance) that needed to be interesting, instead of any object itself.

If it was in part the stolid simplicity of minimalism's objects (in Robert Morris's term, their quality as "gestalts") that deflected viewers' attention onto their own experience of art and its contexts, then Burden's "clinical"²⁰ passivity in the face of the particular experience of being shot at may be seen as an embodied extension (or exaggeration) of the passivity of minimalist objects. The spectacular aspect of Burden's experience also provided for self-reflection on the part of his viewers, at least potentially, along the lines of whether or not they should have participated. It is in this connection that *Shoot* generated the affective dimension necessary to considering its initial audience as a form of community (a dimension that may persist, in subsequent viewers of the work's documentation, in their identifications with those first anonymous audience members, and in questions like "What would I have done?"). In this case, *Shoot* offered a comment on the bloodlessness of minimalism's phenomenological investigations, introducing instead questions of consequences, and both artists' and viewers' participation and responsibility. It explicitly involved not only viewers' bodies but the artist's as well, so that, if the event was in principle repeatable, this potential repetition marked a further departure from minimalism, in that the differences between one experience and the next must be bound to more than the viewer's physical orientation in space (the experience and effect of any repetition, for instance, would be affected by chance).²¹ So *Shoot* may be seen to deal with terms derived from or inflected by minimalism, centrally interest and experience. However, none of this quite answers the question of why Burden (or for that matter anyone else) would choose to engage with or critique minimalism by being shot. Consciously, at least, and outside the realm of fantasy, to echo Willoughby Sharp's dry remark, most people *still* do not want to be shot.

Burden has called his early performances "very private acts."²² On one hand his definition of private seems to be quantitative: "often there were only two or three people there to see them, or maybe just the people who were there helping me."²³ On the other hand, he has also spoken of the audience, however small, as having been a crucial

catalyst in the execution of the works: “I’d set it up by telling a bunch of people, and that would make it happen.”²⁴ These private acts, that is, depended in part for their realization on their informal circulation in the form of invitation and expectation, even before their documentation (and before they were picked up by the mass media). So their private character cannot be separated easily, if at all, from their public orientation.²⁵ Further, this interdependence of private and public was implicitly ethical: Burden established an obligation, or at least an expectation, that he would do something, and might therefore have been shamed had he then not done it.²⁶ And shaming is a crucial means of maintaining the cohesion of idealized, face-to-face communities. This still somewhat formal potential for shaming might also suggest that the affective dimension of the work was to some extent derived, before the fact, from its virtual preexistence, and was not simply a private matter. Buried in this is the question of what it would mean not to meet an appointment to be shot.

Referring to the dispassionate nature of his work’s documentation, Burden has also said that “there would be no explanation as to why these things had happened, or what it meant.”²⁷ He has nevertheless offered a series of consistent if partial explanations of *Shoot* over the years. These may suggest directions in which to begin to interpret the work. Still, if they retain such an impersonal cast that the “why” of it continues to be elusive, that is at least consistent with Burden’s interest in withholding its “private” aspects. I will return to this, but it might be said in advance that its effect was to problematize the term, despite Burden’s stated intentions or his numerical version of privacy, in which case it may be a curious mark of the work’s success, that to ask why Burden had himself shot is in the end beside the point. Twenty years after the interview in *Avalanche*, Burden referred again to television and films (“actually being shot is quite different”), and continued:

I think everyone subconsciously has thought about what it’s like to be shot. Being shot, at least in America, is as American as apple pie, it’s sort of an American tradition almost. To do it in this clinical way, to do something that most people would go out of their way to avoid, to turn around and face the monster and say, “Well, let’s find

out what it's about," I think that touches on some cord [sic], that's why the piece works, that's why a man twenty years later is calling me up with a crank call from Tennessee and is irate about it.²⁸

Repeating the gist of this in 1996, Burden added: "all the audience cannot help but place themselves into my shoes."²⁹

In sum, Burden claims that *Shoot* functions as a kind of lightning rod for inescapable identifications ("all the audience cannot help but place themselves into my shoes") that arc from a specifically American cultural "subconscious." So, if Burden's conception of his performances as private was quantifiable ("often there were only two or three people there to see them"), there was also a version of the public in play ("everyone," "all the audience"), which risked the level of generality of political sloganeering ("the American people," etc.), the effect of which, as I remarked in Chapter 1, is to dissolve social difference. The subconscious that his work calls upon operates in relation to "tradition" and "folklore," but these are tied to mass media, and hence to the generic forms of gun violence, fictional or otherwise: westerns, war movies, crime genres, and also, in 1971, during the Vietnam War, the television news. (In this context, the news—including its YouTube and Facebook variants—may remain the most banal and insidious provider of "atrocious exhibitions."³⁰) Burden may seem to have set in play an unstable relation between a too-empirical version of what is private and a too-general version of the public. Yet his concern with the documentation of his performances speaks of a canny and decidedly post-minimalist understanding that the relations between what he has called "primary and secondary audiences"³¹ (the people who were there and the people who read about it later) were integral to his work. It is tempting at this point to suggest that primary and secondary might be mapped onto private and public, so as to emphasize again their interdependence, yet Burden repeatedly put his primary audiences under stresses which might have generated communal responses. That they did not—that Burden's audiences did not or could not mark themselves out as communities defined by their difference from that amorphous public—might be the point.

Burden is American, and, clearly, so is his "everyone." The body and the subjectivity in question in *Shoot* have a national context that may

have fed a temptation to see (or look for) the work as a direct commentary on the Vietnam War. As a result, we get Burden as heroic victim, as a kind of martyr, whose self-victimization mimics, in protest, the brutality of the war. Such a reading, however, not only repeats the colonial asymmetry of broader historical circumstances—presenting *Shoot* as a home-grown version of Buddhist self-immolations, as seen on television, perhaps—but ignores the art-historical and art-institutional issues to which Burden’s performances were tied. It remains compelling that *Shoot* was performed during the Vietnam War, but Burden himself was sensibly careful not to equate his own (nonetheless real) wound with the wounds of soldiers, as Plagens recounted in 1973: “I asked Burden about that—comparing his bullet wound to a *real* one, suffered by a Vietnam vet or a street-gang member. ‘Isn’t it small potatoes?’ I said. ‘Yes,’ he said.”³² Looked at, instead, in terms of initially narrower, art-related concerns, *Shoot* is seen to have a more general and more subtle relation to its historical context.

Burden’s wound was “small potatoes” in part because its consequences were different. The shot that caused it was not fired in anger but in collaboration, and if Burden’s death was unlikely to have occurred, it was nonetheless conceivable (Burden or his friend the marksman might have slipped, panicked, etc.). But as the sarcastic title of Plagens’ newspaper commentary puts it, “He Got Shot—for His Art.” No national interest was affected by this danger or this wound, and no mission was compromised, no troop (or gang) was endangered, let down, or dishonored. To the extent that it was a life-and-death situation, if it is possible to speak relatively, little was at stake. If Burden had been killed, or more seriously wounded, he would not have become a hero of the anti-war movement (or a martyr to art), but would have been subject to more intense disapproval and ridicule. His friend the marksman and the invited audience would have found themselves with even more serious ethical questions to answer, let alone evidentiary and legal ones.

The audience members would have been in something like the position of witnesses who see but do not intervene in a violent street crime.³³ Regarding the danger or otherwise of *Shoot*, Burden later said, “I’d convinced all the people around me so much that no one even brought a first-aid kit.”³⁴ Afterwards, however, he had to go to hospital,

and because doctors are required by law to report gunshot wounds, he had to make up a story for the police (who were “sure my wife had shot me over a domestic quarrel”).³⁵ In fact, Burden’s domestic fiction, “about going hunting and the gun being on the table and a bottle of vinegar falling on it,”³⁶ not only protected the marksman from possible prosecution but maintained the status of the act as either private or acceptably public. Implicitly, then, one effect of *Shoot* was to suggest that those categories have legal definitions or limits. Given the importance of the private/public distinction to the organization of behavior, by extension, subjectivity too must have legal limits; another effect of *Shoot*, in the spirit of the times, was to flout them.

Further, again implicitly, it seems that questions of responsibility and legality were to be evaded by the positing of the act as art. The “people around” Burden—a casual definition of community, after all—necessarily including the marksman, were apparently convinced by Burden’s somewhat aesthetic, red-on-grey vision of a single drop of blood, “so there would be this grey zone like—was I shot? or was I not?”³⁷ As Burden put it later, perhaps with a hint of art-historical irony, “as art connoisseurs and having some understanding of my intentions,” audience members “had to suppress their normal instincts and participate in the violence.”³⁸ So it is possible to argue that the authority of the event was not bound to Burden’s physical presence, as is often assumed, as much as it derived from the transposition of the illegal act into the context of art (so that he was shot by art, as much as for it). Burden’s presence—in danger, in front of the rifle—was in a sense rendered unrecognizable, and by art. And the photographer’s parallel shot did not quite clarify the situation.

The simple fact that a young man was accidentally shot in the arm by his friend is, unfortunately, in a general sense unremarkable (or, in Burden’s terms, “traditional”), as are the dilemmas of responsibility of participants and passersby. It is in the context of art that this event became so charged, so resistant to explication, and attracted so many subjective designations. And it is in the context of art that the question is posed: why, or whether, in fact, even in the absence of death or serious injury, questions of responsibility were evaded. Significantly, Burden’s friend and the members of the audience have largely maintained their anonymity (though the gunman is identified by Burden as

“Bruce” in the video record). *Shoot*, that is, pressed the question of the consequences of artists’ and viewers’ activities (or passivities) and artists’ and viewers’ responsibilities.

The specific art context in which *Shoot* needs to be considered, as I argued in Chapter 1, is its relation to minimalism. Minimalism rested on a critical engagement with the modernist conception of medium. Modernism required that the artist’s subjectivity be secured in relation to a specific medium. The viewer’s relation to the work was one of purely individual recognition, also supported by that medium. By challenging the modernist understanding of medium, minimalism posited the dependency of relations between artist, viewers, and objects upon their shared context. This allowed for interactions between viewers to affect their relations to the other elements of the aesthetic experience (the absent artist, the work, the space). Minimalism’s break with medium initiated a problem of cause and effect: if the interaction among elements including viewers produced the meaning of the work, so that viewers shared responsibility for it, where was artistic subjectivity to be located or assigned? (Or, in Vito Acconci’s terms, where was the source?) However, the posing of this problem of cause and effect was itself a consequence of the artist’s actions in putting an object in a space. One of the effects of *Shoot* was to draw attention to this, questioning the “birth of the reader” instituted by minimalism, opting for the empirical presence of the artist’s body over the phenomenological equivalences among bodies posited by minimalism.

Where minimalism retained an ambivalent relation to sculpture, Burden took the disavowal of medium further. There is no object in *Shoot*, but a number of candidates for consideration in something like the place of medium: Burden’s body, to be marked by the event; his friend, the agent or proximate cause of the mark; the rifle, as conduit of the marking; the bullet, to cut the wound; the wound, to serve as evidence; the risk, to load the event with import; the very fact of being shot before an audience, to pressure the active role assigned to viewers by minimalism; the photographer, to provide further evidence in the form of documentation,³⁹ and what was not seen, the negotiations, to persuade someone to shoot him and others to watch, again, to pressure the interaction among roles. Enabled by minimalism, but

introducing into empirical spaces elements of both a broad cultural, mass-mediated fascination with violence *and* the small-scale art community, “the people around me,” Burden’s further dispersal of medium and object, together with the insertion of an empirical body, intensified the minimalist problem of cause and effect, translating it into a problem of consequence and responsibility. It might be argued here that in making consequences and responsibility the issue, in connection with such a violent act, *Shoot* put some pressure not only on the formalism of minimalism, but also on the formalism of conceptions of the public that rely on disembodied rationality.

As against the minimalists’ phenomenological spaces, Burden set this problem up as an empirical situation, designed to find out what it is actually like to be shot. If it was an unintended consequence that it also set up a relationship between community and public, it was nonetheless a powerful one. The fact that Burden’s friend the marksman is referred to at all points to the collaborative aspect of the work. First the event itself, and subsequently its documentation, provided for an empathetic (if also repulsed) response, that is, a moment of fantasized viscosity—they “place themselves into my shoes” (though they might also have placed themselves in the marksman’s shoes). But the work assumed and relied upon the idea—and, ultimately, fact—that no one there, no member of Burden’s audience, conceived of as having the potential, at least, to model a small-scale, local community, would step out of the role assigned to them. This was an identification very different from either minimalist viewers’ self-reflexive role in the realization of the work, or the modernist divining of authentic presence via medium. The identification courted by *Shoot* depended, instead, on “participation” in the form of voyeurism and passivity: we can see the photographic documentation now because no one there tried to prevent the performance. It was a flawed identification, too, to the extent that while Burden may now know what it is actually like to be shot, the work could not transmit that. In fact, the voyeurism involved in watching *Shoot*, especially in the first instance, relied upon passivity: in exacerbating the role of viewers, by taking to an extreme the event that was to be identified with, *Shoot* made the case that identification is always necessarily flawed. This is one reason for the repetition of attempts to categorize Burden. Simply, identification

is not identity, the audience cannot know what Burden felt (or know him through what they imagine he felt). Moreover, though Burden has distinguished actually being shot from its representations, he has not said what it felt like. In this sense, the most revealing or expressive element of the work might be the photographer's (or videographer's) involuntary shudder.

Here, it might seem that in *Shoot* Burden sought to reserve for himself a singular, private experience.⁴⁰ He has made a number of somewhat contradictory statements in this regard. In the 1973 *Avalanche* interview, Burden said of the after-effects of doing his performances: "It's like having knowledge that other people don't have, some kind of wisdom. I become party to a private body of information."⁴¹ But in a 1979 interview in *View*, he said "what I do is separate from me as a person."⁴² And in another interview conducted in 1994 and 1996, he emphatically separated his private sense of himself from his public image (and its inaccuracies): "I wasn't the artist who shot himself, and I am not the artist that pushes museums down."⁴³ The shift in emphasis over time may represent Burden dealing with the spectacularizing way in which his work and his image became known to a public broader than many artists have to confront, essentially via tabloid-style mass media coverage. But before that happened, in 1971 and still at the time of the *Avalanche* interview,⁴⁴ it might have seemed possible for the work to generate a singular, "private body of information" (and to imagine that information to be written on Burden's physical body).⁴⁵

The fact that the work was public in the sense that it was performed for an audience, in the first place, and subsequently public in another sense as it circulated in the form of its documentation, does not necessarily offset such assumptions. Burden's experience was defined as singular by contrast with that of the initial audience, and afterwards those of the readers of the various publications in which the documentation appeared. His experience was defined, that is, on the *basis* of the flawed or inconclusive nature of identification. Such a reading would conform to the approach that says that in performance art, the authenticity of the work—its continuity with the being of the artist—is guaranteed by presence (an approach that sees modernist imperatives revived in performance art). Such a reading, however,



CHRIS BURDEN

Shoot

November 19, 1971

#4

Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971.

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ignores salient aspects of *Shoot* that made Burden's presence unrecognizable. Such a reading also flattens out the work's relation to its historical context and ignores the way that Burden's work may be seen to deal with the framing of artistic community against the backdrop of a larger public.

Rather than reserving a private interior for Burden, the effect of *Shoot* was to empty out that possibility. Critics who have tried to allocate Burden a subjective position or read one off against a preexisting category have failed to take seriously, or have attempted to override, his work's characteristic impersonality. It should be noted that if Burden's refusal to reveal any personal dimensions to *Shoot* betokens the work's defense of itself as a private act, then there is a paradoxical aspect to this impersonality that lends itself to diametrically opposed interpretations. In the case of *Shoot*, we are better served in this context by attending to the metaphorical resonance of the physical result of the performance, Burden's wound. For the wound (even the intended graze) may be seen to have opened out Burden's body, without revealing any distinctive interiority (hence the blank affect of the work, and the proliferating attempts to type Burden).⁴⁶ Here the bullet appears as the medium that established the continuity between interior and exterior, in a manner that is reminiscent of Burden's staging of the body as an essentially empty conduit in *Five Day Locker Piece*. But a single piece of empirical "evidence," in the absence of an explicit hypothesis or other framework in terms of which it might be generalized, or a series of repetitions that allow variations to be measured, does not necessarily prove anything. It certainly does not authenticate the experimental subject's experience. Burden's wound, as just such a piece of evidence, does not establish anything more than the brute fact of the shooting.⁴⁷ And the inconclusive identifications of viewers and readers do not construct a framework in which that fact becomes meaningful.

As the bearer of this inconclusive evidence, amid the equally inconclusive identificatory fantasies of his audiences and jostled by the subjectivities projected by his critics, Burden in a sense disappeared, or was hollowed out. He was replaced by a completely public, mass-media borne figure, "Chris Burden, the artist who shot himself." The self, conceived of as emerging from a private interior, was dispersed among subjectivities. This took place precisely as medium, too, was

dispersed among a range of possibilities. In *Sculpture in Three Parts* (10–21 September 1974), one of the works he made after the media had generated its “Chris Burden,” and at least implicitly in response to that, Burden literalized these parallel dispersals. He sat on a stool atop a pedestal in a gallery, with a sign saying he would sit there until he fell, and with photographers constantly on watch. After 43 hours, he fell. A chalk outline was drawn around his body on the floor, and he wrote “forever” inside it. He replaced the original sign with one saying how long he had sat for, and the stool, pedestal, sign, and chalk drawing remained on view for the rest of the exhibition period.

Burden’s initial presence directly addressed the medium of sculpture. He appeared, somewhat comically, in the form of a “human sculpture,” but it could not be assumed that this “sculpture” would last indefinitely. The “medium” here, what might have sustained and expressed a prior, private experience, was Burden’s physical capacity to remain in place. Inevitably, this capacity (in the place of medium) was exhausted and gave way. After that, Burden’s “unique” presence was not expressed but referred to by a series of traces that themselves functioned as traces of different mediums: an ironic drawing, both spontaneously gestural and forensic; a stripped-down sculpture (the arrangement of stool and pedestal); a written text, and—in the work’s continuing existence, clearly integrated into the work by the initial presence of the photographers manning the camera—a photograph. It sometimes appears as though Burden’s work held the possible viability of medium at arm’s length, so that lists of options for consideration in the place of medium are as easy to generate as subjective designations of Burden himself. In this light, his early performances might be seen to offer a continual questioning of their own coherence and the coherence of subjectivity itself, suspended in a matrix of dispersed fragments of medium.

The shadowing of *Shoot* by death also supports the idea that what was in play was not the establishment or furnishing of a subjective interior but the interrogation of the concept. Further, even if the bullet had missed altogether, *Shoot*’s invocation of gunshot wounds and death, in the historical moment in which it occurred, has to be considered in relation to a backdrop of representations of violence, particularly representations of the Vietnam War. Hence, for instance,

Plagens' discomfort with the work. Here we are returned to questions of cause and effect, consequence and responsibility. If the identifications that *Shoot* attracted emerged from a specifically American cultural unconscious, that realm of fantasy and projection must also be seen in relation to the same historical context. For Burden, ostensibly, audience members could (or must) "place themselves into my shoes" because as far as it was relevant to *Shoot*, the public—"everyone"—was constituted in relation to a history of representations of violence. But that history (that "tradition" and "folklore") was bound to the mass media and therefore to programming (repeats, reruns, etc.), which means that it was a history without sequence, a swirl of westerns and science fiction, war and noir, and news, such that six-guns, lasers, and napalm might come to share a generic quality. And "everyone" might come to share that too. Burden's "everyone," that is, the *us*, the collective formed around the violent event, *Shoot*, is suspect. For "our" interest in, or fascination with, representations of violence belongs to—or is assigned to—an imagined, statistical aggregation of moviegoers, television watchers, and tabloid readers, defined by ticket sales, ratings points, and circulation figures. But if that aggregation represents the public in its most attenuated form, "us" and "we" and "our"—even "everyone," idiomatically—have a more local context: "the people around me," the group of people Burden told what he was going to do, who made it happen: his community, one might say (or *Shoot's*).

Burden's own accounts suggest that his experience was defined by distinction from this society of the statistical.⁴⁸ Crucially, however, his own experience must have emerged from it as well; Burden is one of *us*, too, and if "us" and "we" and "our" are suspect, if "everyone" is, then are not "I" and "my" as well? So it might be argued instead, or as well, that the identifications arcing toward *Shoot*, especially in its photographic form, incorporated or reincorporated it into an amorphous cultural field. This is another way of thinking about Burden's "facing the monster," in which the monster is not necessarily the bullet and being shot, as Burden suggests, but the problem of distinguishing oneself from the shapeless entity—in this case a national, cultural entity—that nonetheless shapes that self. And Burden's self-

distinction rested on the inability of his little art community to distinguish itself from that larger formation.

The crucial aspect of representations of the Vietnam War, as far as their relevance to *Shoot* is concerned, is that their meaning was contested. As much as gun violence is part of American folklore, so is the idea that television images from Vietnam helped to galvanize the anti-war movement, specifically by creating a constituency among middle-class voters not expected, by the government at least, to have opposed the war. It can be described as folklore because of the way it condenses elements of the historical situation. Of course, conditions for the growth of the anti-war movement were more complex. Like *Shoot*, images of the war in and of themselves did not necessarily establish anything more than the fact that the war was happening and that it was brutal. But there had been active opposition to the war for years before television images took their much-vaunted effect, which is to say that other interpretations of those images were already available than those offered by the government.⁴⁹ And at a certain point, popular, mainstream media figures began to take editorial positions against the war.⁵⁰ This is the merest sketch, but it is enough to make the point that within and between segments of the government, the media, and the populace, images of the war in Vietnam were subject to radically different interpretations and put to very different purposes. Such contests mean that if the public was constituted around representations of violence, in the period in which *Shoot* was performed, then “everyone” was often bitterly fragmented.

Burden’s experience in *Shoot* was to be distinguished from identifications that emerged from an amorphous, generic collective, which was also a fragmented one: *Shoot*’s own little community was strung between these, too. Given the role of the mass media in either case, the effect of this alternation was to destabilize the opposition between the private and public aspects of the performance, where public refers not only to performance before an audience and subsequent publication, but to the very fantasies that informed the work (traditions, folklores). Burden’s experience, that is, could not be neatly extricated from the fantasies and projections of a public constituted around representations of violence.⁵¹ *Shoot*, then, posed a series of

questions about causality that press the distinction between the self, as something like an essential self-knowledge bound to an interior, and subjectivity, as a position in a system. Where does the self come from that seeks to differentiate itself from the collectives—large and small, statistical and familiar—that formed it? And, can that self be separated from subjectivity, that is, from the inhabitation of and by a position—even a demographic—within the ordering of such collectives; can the Burden of *Shoot* be separated from the masochist, existentialist, survivalist, etc.? If so, what is the nature of the difference or distance between self and subject, especially as *Shoot* should disabuse us of any idea that the body will necessarily guarantee the self, just as Burden’s empirical presence readily dispersed Burden’s self among lists of subjectivities? Or, what is the self’s relation to its “own” experiences, when those experiences are informed by and shot through with, or subject to, broad public and local art fascinations? In terms of *Shoot*’s relation to the overdetermining violent and public event of the period, the Vietnam War, the posing of such questions might have called attention to integral relations between representations of violence and larger and smaller segments of the public, and pointed to problems of self and subject formation in this context.

Burden, as we have seen, has said that “what I do is separate from me as a person.”⁵² Even so, the importance of *Shoot* emerges largely across the grain of his self-interpretations. *Shoot* enacted in miniature, and in the context of art, the constitution of a public around a violent event and its representations. The inconclusive identifications of the initial, live audience, and subsequently those who received the work as documentation, did not provide a framework in which *Shoot* took on meaning. But the very fact that a group formed, answered invitations, came and participated (in their very passivity), *did* provide such a framework. For as the performer of *Shoot*, Burden became subject of and to that public (“I’d set it up by telling a bunch of people, and that would make it happen”). Specifically, the violent event, and therefore its representation, depended on the acquiescence and, in fact, the expectations of that group: “*everyone*” *let it happen, no one tried to stop it*. Covered by art, they could not see it for what else it might have been. The violence of *Shoot* relied on its audience *as community, and* its failure to distinguish itself, as such, from “the public.” It’s in this context that Burden might

be seen to have taken on himself something like the position of that subject in relation to whom community both coheres and dissolves, Agamben's sacred criminal, whose mere physical existence—his “bare life”⁵³—defines the group as those who can determine his fate, and exposes the group as dependent upon his mortality. It is perhaps unsurprising that Burden should in *Shoot*, and subsequently, make works that intentionally or otherwise invoke ethical questions inside somewhat legalistic frameworks.

Minimalism's objects in phenomenological spaces had posed the question of where the responsibility lay for their realization. *Shoot* introduced into an empirical space considerations entirely absent from the spaces of minimalism. At base, it introduced the issue of the relations between art and its subjects and fantasies of violence informed by the mass media. The realization of *Shoot* depended on communal and public acquiescence in such fantasies, and this acquiescence in the first instance allowed the work its extended temporal dimension in the form of documentation (if anyone had prevented it, the description and the photograph would be entirely different). This acquiescence, that is, transformed an empirical space, and moment—F Space, Santa Ana, California, 19 November 1971, 7.45pm—into the virtual space of representation. There, in turn, still on the basis of that first permission, virtual publics could and did form. They rest, perhaps, on the effacement of a guilty knowledge, or else a secretly shared recognition. So *Shoot*'s own nagging empiricism in the end revealed the public, not as an empirical category, but as a grey zone, indeed, defined by judgment and choice—What should I do, in this situation? *Watch*—and by a kind of ethical misidentification: marksman and audience-members remain unnamed, undifferentiated, so that “Chris Burden, the artist who shot himself” can emerge.

Shoot is only the most typical of Burden's performances that used a combination of physical extremity and, frequently, passivity, to make uncertain demands on the audience. This was true of *Doomed* and the *Locker* piece, as well as *Shoot*. Audiences were presented with possibilities for participation and responsibility, however shot through those moments were with dilemma and indecision, before the potential transformations of the empirical audience into a functioning, miniature community, or an ethical public realm, were closed down. Such



CHRIS BURDEN
TV Hijack (Image #1)
February 9, 1972

On January 14 I was asked to do a piece on a local television station by Phyllis Lutjeans. After several proposals were censored by the station or by Phyllis, I agreed to an interview situation. I arrived at the station with my own video crew that I could have my own tape. While the taping was in progress, I requested that the show be transmitted live. Since the station was not broadcasting at the time, they complied. In the course of the interview, Phyllis asked me to talk about some of the pieces I had thought of doing. I demonstrated a TV hijack. Holding a knife at her throat, I threatened her life if the station stopped live transmission. I told her that I had planned to make her perform obscene acts. At the end of the recording, I asked for the tape of the show. I unwound the reel and destroyed the show by dousing the tape with acetone. The station manager was irate, and I offered him my tape which included the show and its destruction, but he refused.

Chris Burden, *TV Hijack*, 1972.

© Chris Burden. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

possibilities are evidenced in the “vigil” that formed during *Doomed*, the constant conversations Burden found himself in during the *Locker* piece, or the possibility, however remote, that the audience would decide that *Shoot* was too dangerous. Burden’s work repeatedly put these potentials in play, and ultimately disallowed them, as if it needed the possibility or idea of audience responsibility to be in effect, but also needed to trump it, in order to function as art. So a sense of arrested or suspended judgment on the part of viewers is a central characteristic of Burden’s performance work.

Clearly, Burden often put viewers and also collaborators (witting or unwitting) in awkward positions. This was most telling in *Shoot*, but also notable in *tv Hijack* and *Deadman*. *tv Hijack* (9 February 1972) is, despite Burden's reputation, the most extreme of only four performances in which he can be said to have taken the active assailant's position.⁵⁴ Burden had been asked to do a performance on a local cable television station, but a number of proposals were rejected and so finally he agreed to do an interview with Phyllis Lutjeans instead. He took his own video crew. Burden's description continues:

I requested that the show be transmitted live. Since the station was not broadcasting at the time, they complied. In the course of the interview, Phyllis asked me to talk about some of the pieces I had thought of doing. I demonstrated a tv hijack. Holding a knife at her throat, I threatened her life if the station stopped live transmission. I told her that I had planned to make her perform obscene acts. At the end of the recording, I asked for the tape of the show. I unwound the reel and destroyed the show by dousing the tape with acetone. The station manager was irate, and I offered him my tape which included the show and its destruction, but he refused.⁵⁵

Because of the apparently sexist aggression toward the host, this remains Burden's most troubling work, despite his subsequent insistence that he "wasn't really putting her life at stake," and "wasn't going to make her do obscene things on live tv." "I said, 'Phyllis, calm down, I'm not really doing it.'" Even so, she jumped out of her seat with Burden holding her hair.⁵⁶ Most charitably, by miming the possibility of a live-transmission murder, *tv Hijack* might be seen to have made some kind of comment on the media as a site of violence. But the performance had the perhaps unintended consequence that Lutjeans was actually afraid and, as an unwitting participant, was victimized. Moreover, this consequence was exacerbated because the performance was subject to similar contingencies as *Shoot*: Burden might have slipped, and Lutjeans evidently, and understandably, did panic. Given her lack of foreknowledge and consent, it is much harder to excuse Burden than his friend the marksman in *Shoot*.

However unsavory, *tv Hijack* is nonetheless instructive. Like *Shoot*, it marked out different registers of interaction. There was a potential



Deadman
Mizuno Gallery: November 12, 1972

At 8 p.m. I lay down on La Cienega Boulevard and was covered completely with a canvas tarpolin. Two fifteen-minute flares were placed near me to alert cars. Just before the flares extinguished, a police car arrived. I was arrested and booked for causing a false emergency to be reported. Trial took place in Beverly Hills. After three days of deliberation, the jury failed to reach a decision, and the judge dismissed the case.

Chris Burden, *Deadman*, 1972.

© Chris Burden. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

or notional television audience (presumably accidental, as the station was not making a scheduled broadcast), like virtual passersby confronted with an unexpected event. There were any members of the station staff present, whose responses were presumably held off by Burden's apparent armed threat (although, suggesting some suspension of *belief*, no one called the police). And there was Burden's own video crew, in a position like that of the photographer in *Shoot*, though their "evidence," refused by the station manager, clarified nothing either. But Burden's presence was made "real" by Lutjeans' response, so that his assistants were put in the position of accomplices.

Yet *tv Hijack* attracted no legal sanction, but was protected, if barely, by its claim to the status of art. In an *Avalanche* interview, over a year later, Burden said of the television station staff, “apparently it freaked them out because they’re still talking about it: ‘I’m still not sure Chris. I’m still not sure.’”⁵⁷ Their uncertainty might be seen as a mark of the uncertain demands that Burden’s work placed on respondents, and their unwitting participation as a captive audience begins to suggest the range of positions upon which Burden was prepared to put pressure, in the absence of a more conventional audience, from Lutjeans to the other station workers to his own assistants, as if in the end to gesture toward possible new audience formations, while disallowing any of them, so that any and all positions of viewership were uncomfortable.

Burden described *Deadman* (12 November 1972), a work that did attract legal attention, as follows: “At 8p.m. I lay down on La Cienega Boulevard and was covered completely with a canvas tarpaulin. Two fifteen-minute flares were placed near me to alert cars. Just before the flares extinguished, a police car arrived. I was arrested and booked for causing a false emergency to be reported. Trial took place in Beverly Hills. After three days of deliberation, the jury failed to reach a decision, and the judge dismissed the case.”⁵⁸

The performance took place in front of, and under the auspices of, the Riko Mizuna Gallery in Los Angeles. Performance art scholar Kathy O’Dell has put together a description of what happened based on the eyewitness accounts of audience members: “Within minutes of being led by Riko Mizuna from the gallery to the bulging tarpaulin marked by two red flares, the audience witnessed the arrival of the police who had been notified *by a passerby* that an accident had occurred. The L.A.P.D. had also summoned paramedics and other rescue units to the site, but upon learning there was no emergency (when asked by a policeman if he were all right and what he was doing, Burden responded that he was doing a ‘piece’), they canceled the emergency calls.”⁵⁹ Audience members “stood without speaking when asked by the arriving police what was going on.”⁶⁰

The first noteworthy aspect of *Deadman* is that it realized and complicated the relation between the (art) audience and passersby that was implicit in *Shoot*. While the police were supposedly sum-

moned by a passerby, the performance artist Barbara Smith, who was there, observed in an essay defending the work in *Artweek* that, “after Burden had placed himself under the car and set the scene, and before the crowd came out of the gallery to see it, several persons walked by and saw the ‘accident’ but seemed neither curious nor alarmed.”⁶¹ This is an anecdotal account, and conceivably one of those persons who *seemed* unconcerned to Smith might in fact have called the police. Still, taken at face value, it suggests (as might cynically have been expected) that there is no broad or natural inclination toward active, public involvement or responsibility.⁶² So *Deadman* called up three responses, all of which might be seen to resonate with questions of participation and responsibility posed by *Shoot*. Some passersby simply ignored it; the “accident” posed no question for them. One turned it over to the authorities. By contrast, the knowing audience refused to do so. The arrival of the police provoked a defensive silence on their part, representing their refusal to participate in a legal intervention into art, or, their refusal of a legal definition of responsible public behavior (though it might also be seen to represent their desire not to be implicated). Shakily, *Deadman* generated a situation in which art was granted precedence over the legal authority of the L.A.P.D.⁶³

The second aspect of the work that deserves attention in this context is that although Burden subsequently claimed that his “assumption was that the police weren’t going to come,”⁶⁴ his defense against the charges was that what he was doing was art (“he was doing a ‘piece’”). This was a good enough defense to hang a jury on a nine-to-three vote against him, and thereby to defeat the prosecution. Burden’s subsequent claim (which there is no reason to believe was not made in good faith) rests both on the acknowledgment of the possibility that the police *might* come and on the assumed indifference of passersby. So, whatever Burden’s expectations, *Deadman* functioned as a kind of inverse provocation (the police will not come because no one, neither passerby nor audience member, will call them). But Burden’s defense suggests that this provocation was made on the basis of the implicit assumption that the legal definition of irresponsible public behavior could not, or ought not to, apply to an event that took place within the context of art.⁶⁵

The association of the artist with the criminal, or outlaw, is a familiar trope. In reflecting on works of his own that either might have or did encounter legal difficulties, Acconci has observed that it can be said that “it was the assumption of art that allowed the artist to court the ‘illegal’; it can be said, further, that this assumption of art vitiated whatever rebellious value the supposedly illegal action may have had (it’s not illegal, it’s only art).”⁶⁶ Whether or not Burden courted or disregarded the “illegal,” the hung jury—incorporated into the work in the descriptive text—seems to mark instead a failure to distinguish *Deadman* as either illegal or “only art,” or both (something that echoes the “I don’t know” that followed *rv Hijack*). Acconci has also suggested that legal trouble advances the association of artist and criminal, or the “position” of artist as criminal, “a position of nostalgia and romanticism.”⁶⁷ There is certainly a temptation to see Burden’s work in this light—waving a knife about, lying down wherever he wants and making a public nuisance of himself—but this is largely overcome if we allow the implications of the work in terms of audience responsibility, which seem neither particularly nostalgic nor romantic.⁶⁸ Here, this suggests the value of Agamben’s qualification of the outlaw, as a figure from whose condition of permanent risk within the juridical order returns the social group’s sense of itself.

Even imagined without the presence of the police and the explicit legal interrogation of Burden’s behavior, *Deadman* juxtaposed the audience members—who, knowing that what was happening was art, would presumably not intervene—against a background of passersby who might or might not be moved to intervene (if only to ask what was going on). Burden’s body, identifiable as a body but otherwise invisible under the tarpaulin, actualized the opacity of the body in *Shoot*. Rendered passive by art, the audience could not recognize the situation for what it was; if it was dangerous, they were waiting to see. Following what I have already suggested about *Shoot*’s relation to its art context, *Deadman*’s play with what might be seen as an onerous passivity has a relation to minimalism. Minimalism placed unlikely objects into familiar, public spaces in order to put a certain kind of pressure on viewers’ experience of those spaces. *Deadman*, like *Shoot*, put unlikely *behavior* into familiar spaces (the street, the gallery), with

the effect (despite limitations in Burden's implicit conception of the public) of increasing the pressure on viewers' experience of those spaces as ones in which they had agency. And the art community, following Burden to the edge of the street and failing to distinguish itself, again, was rendered passive and silent.

Abramović

“YOU CAN STOP. YOU DON’T HAVE TO DO THIS.”



Perhaps against the grain, Burden's work might be conceived of as a critique of community in general and, more specifically, of the art community, in the instance of the community of interest and expectation who showed up and "made it happen." The art community is typically one of relative privilege, either in socio-economic terms or in terms of its cultural capital, or both. It is hardly to be compared with those communities defined by identity, whether that identity be constituted by ethnic, cultural, class, or sexual difference (identities often forged in oppression), although it is primarily in relation to communities of identity that the term "community" has entered the discourse of art.¹

Feminism provides perhaps the most immediate identity-based counterpoint to Burden's work, given that Judy Chicago began the Feminist Art Program on the west coast, first at Fresno State College in 1970 and then at Cal Arts in 1971, with Miriam Schapiro, and Womanhouse took place in Los Angeles in 1972.² Clearly, however, Burden was not interested in any community of identity, something that seems consonant with the ambivalence about protest culture that operates in his work. Burden's simultaneous invocation and disavowal of a small-scale art community, while it certainly generates questions about participation and responsibility, and the continuity between the art community and larger group formations ("public" and "nation," for instance), was nonetheless primarily functional, serving as a kind of platform from which he launched his work. In this sense it remains somewhat abstract: community is limned as a possibility in its failure. Yet the whiff of mortality that the work gives off suggests a connection to Agamben's *homo sacer*, touched on in the previous chapter, as well as the "inoperative community" defined by Jean-Luc Nancy.

(previous page)

Marina Abramović, *Thomas' Lips*, 2005. Performance, 7 hours.

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Photography: Attilio Maranzano. © Marina Abramović, courtesy

Marina Abramović Archives and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

Nancy's theory of community, which emphasizes death as the common experience from which community returns, might at first glance seem counter-intuitive, but it responds to the critique of the ideal of community encapsulated by another political philosopher, Iris Marion Young: "The ideal of community denies and represses social difference, the fact that the polity cannot be thought as a unity in which all participants share a common experience and common values. In its privileging of face-to-face relations, moreover, the ideal of community denies difference in the form of the temporal and spatial distancing that characterizes social process."³

Moreover, as Young also observes, the longing for "consensus and harmony" expressed in the ideal of community depends upon the transparency of subjects, to themselves and to one another, something that both Young and Nancy reject as essentialist, insofar as it disavows the asymmetry of subjective relations and the fragmentation of subjectivity itself.⁴ Nancy's "surprising solution," as Grant Kester puts it, to the question of the role of community for decentered as against self-identical subjects, "is to redefine community around the experience of mortality."⁵ Where subjectivity is constantly negotiated in the encounter with the other, for Nancy, then "it is through death that the community reveals itself—and reciprocally"⁶: "community is revealed in the death of others: hence it is always revealed to others. Community is what takes place always through others and for others."⁷

Kester criticizes Nancy's account for its rejection of the possibility of meaningful communicative interaction. In relation to the mutability of subjectivity that underlies Nancy's position, Kester observes that "[c]ommunication, in whatever form, must involve some ontological and temporal framework (however provisional) within which to speak as well as to listen. In fact, this provisional identity is implicit in Nancy's belief that one of the defining conditions of the 'inoperative' community is a critical perception of the contingency of community and identity itself."⁸ Kester's point is well taken, nonetheless, his reading of Nancy recognizes precisely the provisional aspect of identity (even if his own tendency is to emphasize those moments in which subjectivity "recoheres"⁹). It seems to me that the conclusion that Nancy's work suggests here, in relation to the miming of mortality in a work like *Shoot*, is that community—like subjectivity—is not a

given but a process; community, as a potential generated in extremity, casts a flickering light on what lies beyond identity.¹⁰

The difficulty of thinking community beyond identity is evident in the work of another philosopher involved in a dialogue with Nancy, Giorgio Agamben (whose *homo sacer* suggests a different relation between community and death). For Agamben, community is “coming,” it has not yet been—and, concomitantly, neither has a related politics.¹¹ For someone like Kester this might, understandably, seem like an abandonment of politics altogether. However, it is not necessary to surrender the tactical political value of community in its familiar, identity-based form, while recognizing its liabilities in a broader context. It is certainly true that identity politics has leveraged access to political and institutional processes for groups—and individuals—historically disallowed such access, and also that the project of opening up access is not completed and that opposition to it still flourishes. In the artworld context one need only think of the continuing debates about minoritized artists and their relations to institutional power. However, the other side of that coin is that we have also seen the reification and commodification of identities, as they establish public voices. If we perceive this as a countermanding force which might, ultimately, serve to replicate existing power structures (albeit ventriloquized by more various figures signaling a broader range of social difference), then the difficulty of thinking community beyond identity is joined by its necessity.¹² Hence, perhaps, Agamben’s preparedness to risk an amorphous account of politics,¹³ and to stake the “coming community” on the idea of “whatever singularities.”¹⁴ “Whatever,” here, refers to “singularity in its indifference with respect to a common property”—or, that is, to an identity, “being red, being French, being Muslim.”¹⁵ “Whatever singularities” appropriate to themselves being as such, that is, being beyond representable identity, and might belong together—in that community still to come—without any “representable condition of belonging.”¹⁶ The question left hanging here is by what agency “whatever singularities” might come to be, and come to be together. Nonetheless, Agamben, too, suggests community as a kind of horizon—perhaps always unattainable: like Nancy’s work, this provides a framework in which to understand the “in breach” character of com-

munity as it is engendered in Burden's work. And the question of agency resonates with aspects of the work of Marina Abramović.

In the trajectory described in this book, Burden's work shuttles between an engagement with the public and with community, marking the emergence of community as an (impossible) formation that might be disarticulated from identity. It is Abramović who puts community as horizon of experience beyond identity most strenuously to the test, with most telling—and disturbing—effects, in her *Rhythm* series. It might be added, in this context, that Abramović's complicated relation to feminism—which she largely disavows, as much as commentators want to locate her work in relation to it—plays into “beyond identity” here. Abramović is a Yugoslav artist (born in Belgrade in 1946, and a year younger than Burden), now based in Amsterdam and New York. Prior to the unprecedented publicity generated by her retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 14–31 March 2010, her history was perhaps less well known than Acconci's or Burden's. Very briefly, she began doing performances in the late sixties and concentrated on individual performances (along with video and film) from 1973 to 1976. In 1976 she began a partnership with the German artist Uwe Laysiepen (Ulay/Abramović), which lasted until 1988. Since then she has worked on her own again, in various media; relatively rarely among those artists who earned reputations for it in the seventies, she continues to do performance work. This has included the performance series *Seven Easy Pieces* (9–15 November 2005, at the Guggenheim Museum, New York), in which she “reperformed” five performance works from the seventies by other artists and a work of her own, *Thomas' Lips* (originally performed in 1975, redone on 14 November 2005), as well as presenting one new work.¹⁷

The 1975 version of *Thomas' Lips* is examined in more detail at the end of this chapter. The reenactment was a physically grueling work that involved the artist repeatedly incising a five-pointed star into her belly, using a razor blade. The performance took place on a stage erected in the middle of the ground floor space of the Guggenheim, at the base of the ramp, so that many audience members watched from the lower levels of the ramp. At a point in the performance when

Abramović was preparing to cut herself, again, a young woman in the audience, who I would guess was in her early twenties and whom I had observed becoming increasingly uncomfortable, so that she was in tears when this happened, called out, in a tremulous but clear voice, “You can stop. You don’t have to do this.” She then left, but not before she was immediately answered by a male voice from further up the ramp, ringing out far more assertively, “Yes she does.”

This call and response was to some extent an artifact of the “redo.” The original performance lasted for two hours, but the museum version was scheduled to run from 5pm till midnight, seven hours, so the pacing and repetition of the cutting was altered. Even so, the exchange of voices illuminates possible transformations of the audience that the work put in play. “Yes she does” sees the ordeal of the performance and Abramović’s body as the spectacle of art, something exacerbated in the space of the Guggenheim.¹⁸ “You can stop. You don’t have to do this,” however, suggests an opening up toward community caused by an action which, if it carried no real threat of death, nonetheless invoked harm, and gestured toward that limit. The young woman’s response can be seen as an identificatory moment (an anguished one, in the particular instance) that held the possibility of effacing the barrier between artist and viewer, art and non-art behaviors. Further, that opening up toward community involved a refusal of art as spectacle, justification, guarantee, or excuse. Intervening, and then leaving, refusing the silent spectacle of art, the young woman took up the ethical challenge of the work, leaving behind her the perhaps necessarily spectral possibility of community, while rejecting the actual “art community” in place.

It is clear that Abramović would have agreed that she did have to do it. It is difficult not to see this exchange in gendered terms, although, as mentioned, Abramović is typically very cagey (at best) about her work’s relation to feminism. She commented on *Rhythm 0*, for instance, that she “never thought that it was female energy. The courage to do the piece seemed more male, from my point of view.”¹⁹ There may be an interesting switching of typical gender assignments embedded in this statement, as the requisite courage involved extreme passivity, but it is not difficult to understand why Abramović’s statements might frustrate feminist interpreters. Nonetheless, the

Guggenheim exchange describes a complex mesh of sometimes conflicting vectors of agency, for artist and viewers alike, from which the question of the status of community derives, in relation to her work. And this was put in play in the five works of the *Rhythm* series of 1973–1974, culminating in *Rhythm 0*, which presented a sequence of dilemmas of agency. Like other performance art of that period, the *Rhythm* series was concerned with capacities and limits. Characteristically, we might say that performance work in that moment was concerned with the capacities and limits of the body, as in Acconci and Burden's brute, empirical tests of physical parameters. Tactics used by artists involved in these investigations included the setting up of risk situations, endurance tests, and various forms of training exercises. For American artists like Acconci and Burden, for whom phenomenology had been introduced into aesthetic discourse with minimalism, the interest in the body broadened, to take in questions of the relations between body and subjectivity, and of the limits and contingency of subjectivity. Abramović's work can to some extent be seen to be continuous with this slightly earlier body of work, insofar as Acconci and Burden were among the artists whose work was influential for Abramović, even though she only ever saw their work in reproduction at the time.²⁰

In relation to this, Abramović's *Rhythm* series can be seen to have been particularly concerned with the status of agency; in different ways, the five performances in the series put pressure on any presumed identity between agency and subjectivity, and agency and activity. They did so without reference to depth psychology, and can be seen to be anti-psychological. When her agency exceeds her conscious control, at least during the performances, this is not to be attributed to the actions of the unconscious. Of course, there is an intentional framework: Abramović herself set up these situations, in which her agency was to be surrendered or transformed, but, even so, the outcomes were not predictable. And it is in the transformations of agency that we may also detect the emergence of limit-cases of community.

The first work in the series was *Rhythm 10* (1973). In the initial performance at the Edinburgh Festival, Abramović recorded herself stabbing between the fingers of her left hand, as fast as she could, with each of twenty knives in turn, changing knives each time she cut herself.



Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 5*, 1974.

© Marina Abramović, courtesy Marina Abramović Archives and Sean Kelly Gallery, NY

She then rewound the tape and played it back, while reperforming the action to the recorded rhythm of the first part. Abramović claims to have cut herself in the same places, and has written that in this performance, “the mistakes of time past and time present are synchronized.”²¹ Presumably, if you practiced at this, you might improve, both at missing your fingers, and in your ability to reproduce the initial rhythm. Except, however, that if you got really good at missing, you might actually disable the work (there would be nothing to repeat): which is to say that in Abramović’s farcical repetition, history is bound to error. It is worth flagging this because performance art quite often puts in play effects that are to do with error and memory: the frequent failures in Acconci’s early work come to mind (think of *Blindfolded Catching* or *Conversions*), or the near-impossibility of the imagined “grazed wound” in *Shoot*, as well as the unreliable aids to

memory provided by performance documentation. These speak to both history and experience, and the roles of both artists and viewers, as subtended by error. But whether or not Abramović actually cut herself in the same places is less important than the fact that—however willfully—she subjected her activity to an anterior scheme (or rhythm) over which she had limited control.

If we see the series as a developing sequence, perhaps she still had too much control. *Rhythm 5*, the second work in the series, was performed at an art school student center in Belgrade in 1974. Abramović constructed a five-pointed star of wood shavings within a wooden frame, the shavings soaked in gasoline. Ritualistically, Abramović lit the star, walked around it, cut her hair, fingernails, and toenails and threw them into the points of the star, then entered the space in the center and lay down. Her intention was simply to lie there until the star burned out. But a five-pointed red star was the dominant symbol of Tito's Yugoslavia, ubiquitous in everyday life. Given this, *Rhythm 5* might be seen as a political provocation, an aestheticized flag-burning. Or else, Abramović might have been pointing to, or participating in, and/or enacting her victimization by "the fanaticism of the red star."²² Or, given her sacrificial gestures, when the fire had burned out, Abramović might have emerged, as it were, ritually purified.

Whether a critical provocation or an attempt at transcendence, *Rhythm 5*, in its original formulation, appears as a risky encounter with history, in which Abramović's behavior was to some degree given over to the local historical conditions unavoidably symbolized by that star. In the event, however, and again, the outcome was not predictable (or at least not predicted): the burning gasoline apparently consumed the oxygen in the space, and Abramović passed out. When flames touched her leg and she still did not move, two members of the audience went and got her out. In shifting beyond Abramović's intention, *Rhythm 5* became more complicated: her survival became less an arguably tendentious aestheticized provocation or ritualized transcendence, and more a matter of urgency that required audience members to choose whether or not to intervene. Metaphorically as well as actually, the performance was no longer constrained by the framework of the star. Here we might see her rescuers as representing the formation of a community, which refused to respect the star as a

barrier returning if not from death, then from its possibility, founded in Abramović's failure to anticipate what would happen.

In terms of the internal development of the *Rhythm* series, *Rhythm 5* was important because it prompted Abramović to ask, explicitly, "how to use my body in and out of consciousness without interrupting the performance."²³ Her first attempt at this was *Rhythm 2* (Zagreb, 1974), in which she first took a drug usually given to catatonic patients to make them move, then, after the effects of that had worn off, a drug given to schizophrenic patients to calm them down. In Abramović's account of Part I, her muscles contracted wildly until she lost control of them: "Consciously I am very aware of what is going on but I can't control my body." In Part II, she first felt cold and then completely lost consciousness, "forgetting who and where I am." The performance finished when the medication lost its effect, and Abramović gives the time period as six hours.²⁴

That you might watch someone forget herself seems not uninteresting (and may foreshadow the putting aside of the self in *Rhythm 0*), but it's not clear how you would know what you were watching. So *Rhythm 2* seems rather formulaic (at worst, stunt-like). The idea of performance and agency exceeding consciousness is more precisely communicated—after the fact, at least—in relation to *Rhythm 4* (Milan, 1974). In one room, Abramović approached a high-pressure air blower; in another room the audience saw a video monitor, focused on her face without the blower. As she bent over the blower, Abramović passed out (again) but, she writes: "this does not interrupt the performance. After falling over sideways the blower continues to change and move my face. . . . [T]he performance lasts 3 more minutes, during which the public are unaware of my state." She concludes: "In the performance I succeeded in using my body in and out of consciousness without any interruption."²⁵ Here I think there is a link between Abramović's preservation of intention and the manipulation of the viewers, who are disallowed from seeing exactly what is happening (unusually, in Abramović's work), and presumed not to know what they are looking at, while watching its representation. This is a strange dislocation: the audience comes together to watch Abramović, who, at a certain point, becomes indifferent to them.

In *Rhythm 4*, almost as if correcting the interruption of *Rhythm 5*, Abramović prevented any intervention by viewers, but at the cost of a live audience. There is a cumulative logic to the series, and in *Rhythm 0*, which Abramović describes as having concluded her “research on the body when conscious and unconscious,”²⁶ she established, or at least represented, the continuity between consciousness and unconsciousness by a different method, an extraordinary and paradoxical effort of will (roughly, the willed abandonment of will). And she demanded the intervention of the audience.

Rhythm 0 was performed in a gallery in Naples in 1974. In the gallery, viewers, or visitors, found a table covered with a white cloth on which were arrayed a series of objects. Abramović has described the work as follows:

Instructions.

There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired.

Performance.

I am the object.

During this period I take full responsibility.

Duration: 6 hours (8pm–2am).²⁷

Before describing what I understand to have happened, it is worth noting minor discrepancies among descriptions of the work. In two different texts, Thomas McEvilley writes that it was announced to the audience—by the gallery director—that Abramović would remain completely passive, for six hours. Paul Schimmel has borrowed this description, describing the predetermined length as a Cageian strategy giving a nonlinear event a beginning and an end. In the compendium *The Artist’s Body*, edited by Tracey Warr, no mention is made of duration, and we are told the instructions took the form of a text on the wall; and, in relation to the work’s duration, RoseLee Goldberg, Warr, and McEvilley have written that the work ended not because the preset time ran out but because part of the audience “put a stop to it,” “halted it,” or declared it over.²⁸ Abramović has said that at the end of the time period, she walked toward the audience, who fled.²⁹

The question of announcement or text might not seem especially important, although a spoken announcement interpellating the people

there as participants might have focused or shaped the group more than having them find and read a text, individually. It may be a more significant question, whether or not there was a predetermined duration, and whether or not, as McEvelley puts it in one of two contradictory versions, “perilously, Marina completed the six hours.”³⁰ It is not clear which of these critics other than McEvelley were at *Rhythm 0*, but such little discrepancies point to a methodological issue in dealing with performance art. Broadly, this might be described as the after-the-factness of performance. One tendency in the history of performance art, touched on in Chapter 1, says, basically, you had to be there. Hence, for instance, the title of the RoseLee Goldberg essay I referred to, “Here and Now.” But of course, hardly anyone ever was, so that a complex set of relations is put into play, between an event that happened in a particular place and time, and its subsequent mediation, not only in photography, film, or video, but also in description and memory (and, it should be added, in the questions people ask). So to the extent that performances, like other relatively ephemeral practices, generate a community of memory (whether or not that is even the memory of people who were present), they may also generate a community of error. Clearly, performances themselves become screens onto which people project, just as much as the body of the artist in performance.

Bearing this qualification regarding memory and error in mind, the most detailed description of what happened comes from McEvelley (and his description tends to be recycled by other commentators):

It began tamely. Someone turned her around. Someone thrust her arm into the air. Someone touched her somewhat intimately. The Neapolitan night began to heat up. In the third hour all her clothes were cut from her with razor blades. In the fourth hour the same blades began to explore her skin. Her throat was slashed so someone could suck her blood. Various minor sexual assaults were carried out on her body. She was so committed to the piece that she would not have resisted rape or murder. Faced with her abdication of will, with its implied collapse of human psychology, a protective group began to define itself in the audience. When a loaded gun was thrust to Marina’s head and her own finger was being worked around the trigger, a fight broke out between the audience factions.³¹

McEvelley made an important and problematic addition to this in a subsequent essay, noting that the audience was comprised of “a random crowd brought in off the street, along with some art world aficionados,” and that the event was declared over, “when the art world constituency rebelled against the aggressive outsiders.”³² Perhaps this is true, but it is not a division that should comfortably be accepted without better evidence: there are enough instances in the history of performance in which specialist audiences have taken aggressive roles (as in Ono’s *Cut Piece*) or not intervened (as in *Shoot*) that this somewhat self-congratulatory account cannot be taken for granted.

The critical response to *Rhythm 0* has tended to focus on Abramović’s passivity. McEvelley describes it as “a classic of passive provocation,” and Goldberg sees it as an exercise in “passive aggression.”³³ Iles relates it to Marcel Duchamp—the body as readymade—and to Duchamp, again, and John Cage, via its passivity.³⁴ Schimmel also sees it in relation to Cageian strategies.³⁵ More substantively, Kathy O’Dell, while not discussing this work in particular, discusses similar works in terms of an idea of masochism derived from the philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s encounter with the Marquis de Sade in *Coldness and Cruelty*, with its emphasis on the “masochistic contract.” Writing about Burden’s *Shoot*, for instance, she says: “Each of the individuals involved, therefore, agreed to tacit or specified terms of a ‘contract’ with the artist. . . . [T]he crucial implication of such masochistic performances concerns the everyday agreements—or contracts—that we all make with others but that may not be in our own best interests.”³⁶

The effect of this, for O’Dell, is to reveal the alienation bound up with such everyday agreements. Generally, the “masochistic” artists of the seventies, “wanted to reactivate a meeting of the minds, specifically in the form of a negotiation of differences between individuals or negotiation among the various identities inherent in one’s own being.”³⁷ This “meeting of the minds,” though, also suggests the mutual transparency that is central to idealizations of community. In a similar vein that seems to invoke community, Kristine Stiles has written, regarding so-called “masochistic” performances: “While certainly expressing the inversion of external suffering back on the self, they were accomplished neither for the sake of personalized erotic pleasure or desire, but as vital culturally shared communications between



Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 0*, 1974. Performance, 6 hours. Studio Morra, Naples.
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the artists and tiny groups of individuals partaking in the context and experiences metaphorically enacted and metonymically shared.”³⁸

It is clear that the work depends on a form of passivity, and in the performance art of the period passivity often appears provocative or aggressive, as it stymies and frustrates audience expectations. Abramović has avowed an interest in Cage. But the body cannot be a readymade, to the extent that it cannot be separated from a subject and cannot quite be an object. As Burden once observed of the demands he placed on a gallery director with one of his own passive pieces, “I wanted to force him to deal with me by presenting myself as an object. But I’m not an object, so there’d be this moral dilemma.”³⁹ Rather, the body is better regarded as a process. Masochism and the masochistic contract remain unconvincing as explanatory devices: first, because a work like *Rhythm 0* relies on a disavowal of psychology; second, because the outcome was not predetermined to involve pain; third, because the idea of a contract does not account for the manipulation of the audience, and fourth, because if its end result is a “meeting of the minds” or “vital culturally shared communication,”

then the nature and perhaps the radicality of avant-garde modeling of experience is misunderstood. On the contrary, Abramović's passivity might represent a pointed resistance to the very idea of shared communication.

Rhythm 0 might seem at first to have owed something to the passivity and risk involved in works like Ono's *Cut Piece* and Burden's *Shoot*. What differentiates it from the earlier works is that it was structured by Abramović's extraordinary willed inertia, her refusal or reservation of private subjective interiority, and by time, whether predetermined or open-ended. Whatever was to happen during those six hours was evidently far less precisely imagined or organized than the possibilities posed by Ono's scissors, or by Burden's very specific activity. It is very important that the objects on the table were not only dangerous or threatening, so that the aggression toward Abramović and the violence that developed were not the only possible outcome. It is possible, after all, to imagine another version in which Abramović is tickled or massaged or fed cake for six hours, or one in which audience members enact their own dramas in front of her, or whatever (even if that is not what the work courted: the presence of photographs of Abramović's earlier work on the walls of the gallery perhaps helped to condition audience responses). In that regard, *Rhythm 0* might have had its audience as a participatory construction. But what actually happened was that it generated an amalgam of the exposure of gendered fantasy and the adumbration in the negative of an ethical community. It did so in almost as aversive a form as it is possible to imagine, generating a crudely contestatory arena in which violence was met with violence, as the audience becomes factionalized.⁴⁰

Rhythm 0 can certainly be read in terms consistent with those I put forward in Chapter 1, as a work that undoes public/private relations. For *Rhythm 0* suggests a question, one that is particularly pertinent for women (however Abramović might define the "energy" of the work) in the face of sexual violence: what, if anything, guarantees whatever sense you have of the integrity of your body, as private? Is it the state, and its laws? The body is a kind of mobile border between public and private: we assume a kind of "ownership" of our bodies and their capacities, even though we must recognize that this is not entirely true, or not always the case. In *Rhythm 0*, Abramović effec-

tively declared her body to be, if not public, then not private, that is, she gave up the normative indicators of ownership of her body so that the normal or normative distinction between public and private did not apply. She undid the binding between property and subjectivity, and between the public/private split.

Here we see an inversion of sovereignty undertaken more fully, subsequently, in Hsieh's work. In *Rhythm o*, Abramović, more distinctly than Burden, takes up something like the position of *homo sacer*, the "sacred man" of Roman law that Agamben uses to represent "bare life," that is, physical being with the potential to be included or excluded from social-political order. For Agamben, what is crucial about *homo sacer* is that this is a figure of law, who in punishment for certain crimes could be killed by anyone, but who could not be ritually sacrificed, "in which human life is included in the juridical order . . . solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, its capacity to be killed)."⁴¹ For Agamben, the fundamental question of modernity is how bare life is politicized, that is, how it is included in or excluded from political order—or, how it is valued, and what that might mean. *Homo sacer* stands as the inverse double of the sovereign who, like and unlike the sacred man, stands both inside the juridical order and outside it, insofar as the sovereign determines the "state of exception," when the law that determines the politicization of bare life (of which bare life matters and which does not) is suspended.

In mundane terms, the politicization of bare life tends to devolve onto property relations, onto the sense of the body as a property over which one has rights of disposition. This is what is so disturbing about *Rhythm o*. If my body is not mine (if it is not *me*), if it is not my property, whose is it? And where am "I," then? The effect of a woman, particularly, giving up this in any case fictional relationship to her body was dually to situate Abramović in a position that represented or revealed bare life, and to expose the gendered and pathological effects—or, the pathologically gendered effects—of abandoning the public/private distinction, fundamentally bound up, as it is, with notions of property. In the face of the pathological effects of Abramović's abandoning the public/private split, what evidently happened was that some people literally fought to reassert that distinction, as if to say that those six hours of art could not take place beyond that other fiction.

It is possible to open this out further, and to provide a reading that distinguishes *Rhythm 0* from the analysis in terms of the disturbance of public and private. It is possible to argue, after Nancy and Agamben, that in *Rhythm 0* Abramović at least gestured toward the abandonment of identity altogether. The very general claim to be made about works by artists like Ono, Burden, and Abramović is that they established situations in which viewers had to decide what to do. Ono's *Cut Piece* perhaps makes it clearest that that decision might take one into a public arena: people who decided to go and use the scissors had to walk up onto the stage.⁴² That same decision is in place in *Rhythm 0*, too, but unlike Ono, Abramović always occupied the same space as her audience, thereby modeling the space, and the internal relations, of community. Whatever you did, you did in front of, but also within, the group. Your actions were available for judgment, if also for encouragement; in fact, your actions were at least as available for judgment as Abramović's (and perhaps that was intolerable to some of the people there). And viewers of the work's documentation, after the fact, may be prompted to think about what they might have done in that situation (another form of a community of error, perhaps). So if *Rhythm 0* did not establish a kind of ethical testing zone, the situation was at least traversed by ethical questions, both of a mundane nature (what to do), but also of a more fundamental kind: how to deal with the other, where Abramović staged herself—like *homo sacer*—as at once radically other and within the group.

In beginning to sketch a politics to come, in relation to the community to come, Agamben observes that “in the final instance the State can recognize any claim for identity.”⁴³ The State, that is, can incorporate identity claims into the existing organization of power, and for Agamben it is the possibility of the refusal of representable identity articulated in “whatever singularities” that poses a threat that “the State cannot come to terms with.”⁴⁴ Clearly, *Rhythm 0* was not going to bring down the State: by extension, however, it might be argued that power operates in group formations in and through identity, and that the refusal of identity is therefore a challenge to power. Perhaps it was this aspect of Abramović's performance that became intolerable to some of the audience. So the ethical questions that *Rhythm 0* posed were bound up with how one chose to stand in



Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 0*, 1974. Performance, 6 hours. Studio Morra, Naples.
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Sean Kelly Gallery, NY

relation to power. Interestingly, Abramović's description suggests that these questions were not to be separated from questions of individual desire: "There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired." And the question of the ethics of desire was put in play and mediated by Abramović's willed abandonment of will. Agamben, it should be noted, argues that "whatever singularity," insofar as it emphasizes the "as such" of being, "has an original relation to desire," because desire and love are not bound to this or that property of the loved one.⁴⁵

Iles remarks that Abramović "operated like a mirror onto which the public projected themselves. The three main roles they constructed for her were madonna, mother and whore."⁴⁶ Better, though, to turn this description around, and suggest instead that viewers failed to see themselves reflected: Abramović became a projective screen, not a mirror. And if Iles is right, madonna and whore are figures bound up with overdetermined systems of representation of women and familiar discourses of desire. More to the point, however, audience-members' need to "construct roles" for Abramović, to name her or to call her something, one way or another, speaks to the connection between

ethics and recognition claims. O'Dell touched on this in her remarks about the negotiation of differences between individuals. But here we would have to revise or make a little more explicit the everyday encounter with ethics, to something like what should I do, in this situation, in relation to this other, among these others? This is to refer to a familiar contention, that in order to live a good life, one must recognize and respect the difference of the other. As a matter of fact, what usually "requires recognition is a group-specific cultural identity" (such that the politics of recognition comes to mean "identity politics").⁴⁷ In relation to this, what becomes so compelling about *Rhythm o* is Abramović's resolute refusal of any such group-specific identity, her refusal to be identified. Arguably, this is what drove those members of the audience who became aggressive.

One way to interpret what happened in *Rhythm o* is to say that Abramović became subject to promiscuous identification, including, if we follow Iles, identification as madonna and whore. This is to say that she was ascribed a position within a system of representation of women that serves to control difference (and desire, certainly women's desire); and, whether or not we think Iles is right, even the fact that she interprets fragments of the event in this way suggests the persistence and power of those fully spectacularized and commodified images. Yet, in her passivity, Abramović remained indifferent to these and any other positions; she refused to recognize them or to be recognized by them. One conclusion that might be reached is that *Rhythm o* is a hyperbolic demonstration of the construction of female subjectivity from without, or of female subjectivity as purely exterior, an imposition. It is a subjectivity without identity except insofar as it is defined, called something, by a group (what's more, a group internally divided over what it should be called).

Iles also writes: "At one point someone put a mirror in her hands and wrote in lipstick on it 'Y sono libero' (I am free)."⁴⁸ But Abramović gave no sign of seeing herself in this either. Her evacuation of interiority, or of the signs of interiority, maintained equal indifference to madonna, whore, eros, or freedom. She enacted indifference, that is, to all properties, to anything she might be called, and to any and all categories she might be asked to stand for. If, for various audience members, she did—or could be made to—stand for this or that cate-

gory, she herself refused to answer to them. She performed the refusal even to acknowledge what she was called. In this instance, though, performance and refusal verge on the same thing, the autonomy, that is, and/or alienation of the generic or common underpinning of existence, in other words, language. This is why notions of a meeting of the minds or of vital, shared communication (with their implications of communities of interest) miss the point. It is possible that Abramović guides us toward some notion of the beyond of language to which we all belong. However, her refusal to be what she is called, the assumption of singularity in her “indifference with respect to [any] common property,”⁴⁹ which has the effect of generating the welter of promiscuous identification, suggests that the one thing to which Abramović was not indifferent was the fact of being-called, and her alienation from that. In this regard, the effect of *Rhythm 0* was the paradoxical one of modeling a subject without representable identity, that being, after Agamben, “whose community is mediated not by any condition of belonging.”⁵⁰

If we detect in Burden’s work a highly qualified relation to protest culture, it is possible to find in Abramović’s a relation to the more universalist, “hippie” end of the counter-culture. This is evident in the ritualistic trappings of some of the works, it is at work in the self-transcending, self-transforming aspects of the work, and it operates in Abramović’s own statements.⁵¹ It may help to explain why Abramović’s work has not typically been legitimated in terms of some of the more familiar forms of criticality—certainly it can be situated at the less explicitly political end of a spectrum of works, however radical in many art-historical respects, which emerged from the sixties. Like Burden’s ambivalence, though, Abramović’s transcendental tendencies may obscure an underlying analysis of what are in the end fundamental political issues. Abramović’s work also retains what might be described as a more practical, as well as a more complex relation to facets of politics, broadly conceived. Abramović learned from *Rhythm 0* that “in your own performances you can go very far, but if you leave decisions to the public, you can be killed.”⁵² *Rhythm 0* had confronted audience members, uncomfortably, with a fundamental political question: the artist’s representation of bare life put



Marina Abramović, *Thomas' Lips*, 1975.

Performance, 2 hours. Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck.

© Marina Abramović, courtesy Marina Abramović Archives and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

viewers in the untenable position of the sovereign who can assert or reject the value of Abramović's being.

Her next but one performance was the original version of *Thomas' Lips*, which was especially bloody. In a complex scene, following the ritualized ingestion of wine and honey, she incised the Yugoslavian five-pointed star into her stomach with a razor blade, before beating herself with a whip, "until I no longer feel any pain."⁵³ Up until this point, *Thomas' Lips* suggests that after the seemingly conclusive and dangerous submission of *Rhythm 0*, and the concomitant surrender of sovereignty, it was necessary to reclaim violence for herself (as if to underscore the centrality of violence to group formations). Then:

I lay down on a cross made of ice blocks.

The heat of a suspended heater pointed at my stomach causes the cut star to bleed.

The rest of my body begins to freeze.

I remain on the ice cross for 30 minutes until the public interrupts the piece by removing the ice blocks from underneath me.⁵⁴

The continued self-mortification, by heat and cold, sets the reclamation of violence in relation to mortality as its possible effect, and sets in motion yet another limit-case of community. Abramović submitted herself to her audience and challenged that audience to refuse her as spectacle. To the degree that the audience members' intervention to protect her from harm suggests that they respected and valued her mere being, this mimes the politicization of bare life.

In 2005, however, the reenactment simply ended at midnight, with Abramović still on ice. The more formal and inherently spectacular setting of the Guggenheim's rotunda clearly contributed to the limitation of possible audience interventions (if anyone had tried to "rescue" Abramović, I'm sure they would have been met by a security guard). The audience there, while certainly relatively specialized, was of a very different order than the smaller audiences who watched her performances the first time around. The anguished response of the young woman who called out to Abramović at the Guggenheim is not to be dismissed. One way to see it is as if the woman recognized the ethical dimensions of the work through the intervening three decades (though of course there are other interpretations: she might have been expressing a more contemporary feminist concern with female self-mutilation, for instance), but we are left with speculations. Ultimately, the changed possibilities of audience engagement appear as a function of the arc of Abramović's career, as it coincides with the institutionalization (and spectacularization and commodification) of performance art. The "redo," or reperformance, may raise valid questions about the permanence or otherwise of performance art, questions about how to document and historicize it. For all that, having already survived *Thomas' Lips* thirty years before, having seen the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and as the reigning *diva* of performance art, Abramović could no longer reimagine an audience distinct from the spectacle or mobilize a concern with the predicament of bare life.

Hsieh

“FOR ME, THE AUDIENCE IS SECONDARY.
HOWEVER, WITHOUT THEM MY PERFORMANCES
COULDN'T EXIST.”

WANTED BY U.S. IMMIGRATION SERVICE

Date : July 13, 1974

Name : Hsieh Teh-Ching

Photo take in 1974



Hsieh Teh-Ching

DESCRIPTION

Age : 24 Born 12/31/1950

Eyes : Black

Hair : Black

Weight : 115 Lb.

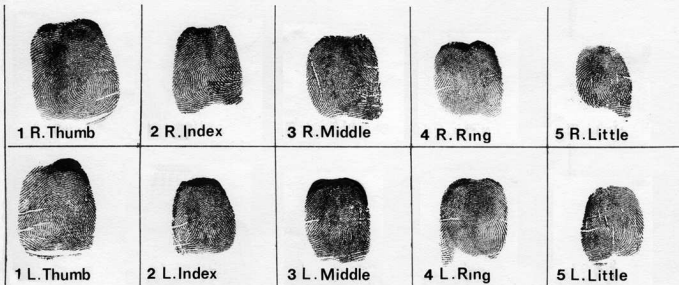
Height : 5'3"

Race : Oriental

Nationality : Chinese

OCCUPATION : Seaman

VIOLATION : Illegal Entry, without visa



please call: 212-349-8735

Before Abramović's canonization, Tehching Hsieh had already received the imprimatur of the Museum of Modern Art's belated recognition of performance art when, in 2009, an exhibition of the documentation of *One Year Performance 1978–79 (Cage Piece)* inaugurated the museum's "Performance Exhibition Series."¹ *Cage Piece* was the first of the series of *One Year Performances* that Hsieh did in New York between 1978 and 1986. In it, he inhabited an 11 foot 6 inches by 9 foot by 8 foot cage inside his studio for a year, neither conversing, reading, or writing, nor listening to the radio or watching television, during which time a friend took charge of his food, clothing, and waste. The other performances were *Time Clock Piece* (1980–1981), in which he punched a time clock on the hour every hour, 24 hours a day, for 365 days (missing only 133 of 8,760 potential punches); *Outdoor Piece* (1981–1982), in which Hsieh spent an entire year living outdoors, intending not to go into any building, subway, train, car, airplane, ship, cave, or tent (a plan only disrupted by Hsieh's being briefly arrested and taken into a police station after a fight—film documentation makes his distress quite clear); *Rope Piece* (1983–1984), in which Hsieh spent a year tied by an eight-foot rope to another artist, Linda Montano, when they were never alone, were always in the same room at the same time when they were indoors, and were never to touch (though there was occasional accidental, incidental contact); and finally in the fifth in the series (1985–1986), Hsieh spent a year without art (neither doing it, talking about it, reading about it, nor going to galleries or museums—"just going in life"). Then, between 31 December 1986 and 31 December 1999, Hsieh made art in secret during *Thirteen Year Plan*, to announce on 1 January 2000, "I kept myself alive."²

Hsieh's works present a challenge to any conventional understand-

(previous page).....

Tehching Hsieh. *Wanted by U.S. Immigration Service*. Poster.

© 1978 Tehching Hsieh. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

ing of the audience, in the first instance, by virtue of their sheer duration. No one could “see” more than a fraction of any of the works: the *Cage*, *Time Clock*, *Outdoor*, and *Rope* pieces all reserved days when the public could come and see the work (opening and closing days, and then others at intervals through the years). For *Outdoor Piece*, without a set location such as Hsieh’s studio, Hsieh met members of the public at specific sites on five days.³ Still, *Outdoor Piece*, especially, functioned in part by glimpse and rumor.⁴ This was also true, if in an even more attenuated way, of the year without art, and the final thirteen-year piece. So in terms of its physical audience, Hsieh’s work began in relation to a very small art community.⁵ By the time of the *No Art Piece*, knowledge of Hsieh’s work relied on interviews and essays published up until then, but Hsieh—often out of sight, occasionally stealing into view—might also be seen to have begun to haunt the artworld, his ephemeral figure at once legendary and marginal. This would account for his ability, through thirteen years of invisibility, to maintain a relationship to the artworld audience.

I have argued that Acconci, Burden, and Abramović had already put the idea of the audience under considerable pressure. Hsieh did not confront audiences with their own behavior by the same means as the other three artists. There are certainly related elements in Hsieh’s performances,⁶ but Hsieh’s work is not provocative in the same ways: there is little concern with the breaking of taboos (or where there is, it is more subtle),⁷ and none of the physical violence. There is a sequence of works in which Acconci, Burden, and Abramović asked audiences to grapple with the choices they must make, in the context of the collapse of the public/private distinction and of a profound ambivalence about the possibility of a meaningfully public realm or of community. That ambivalence was grounded in part in the artists’ relations to protest culture, emerging from the sixties. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that such a sequence met its end at the beginning of what might be called the Thatcher/Reagan era, in a startling reversal in which Hsieh reframed art altogether by making the withdrawal from art into his art practice, just “going in life,”⁸ while crucially retaining a hold, however tenuous, on an art audience. Where Acconci, Burden, and Abramović legitimated their own be-



Tehching Hsieh. *One Year Performance 1978–1979. Life Image.*
Photograph by Cheng Wei Kuong. © 1979 Tehching Hsieh.
Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

haviors as art, and consequently those of their real or ideal audiences, in the context provided by Hsieh's work, the audience's confrontation with choice could not be distinguished from a fundamental life task.⁹

Hsieh's performances continued the work of radically reimagining the role of the audience, and did so in a cultural climate significantly further removed from the counter-cultural, experimental aspects of the sixties. But this has not been the focus of the critical response, which, despite Hsieh's thoroughgoing self-erasure, follows the dominant tendency in the literature on performance art by focusing on subjectivity. The interest in subjectivity is expressed in the tendency (implicit or explicit) to ask, especially of the five one-year performances, what was Hsieh *like*? What *kind* of person would put himself through such things? Of course this is understandable, especially as the very material of performance art has so often been seen to be the self, or subjectivity more generally. In a review of Hsieh's work from 2001, for instance, Jill Johnston describes performance as "a genre virtually defined by its bias for autobiographical source material."¹⁰ As

I observed in the Introduction, much of the critical reflection on performance art written in the last decade or so confirms this, to the extent that it provides elaborations of the social construction of subjectivity.¹¹ Even when such reflection insists that performance art participates in important ways in the fragmentation or dispersal of a coherent (usually modernist) subject, it nevertheless accepts subjectivity as the principle matter of performance art.¹² Yet it is clear by now that significant work by those performance artists discussed in this book takes the self as its material only insofar as it resists subjectivity as a central problematic in more searching ways, which are bound to the transformations of the audience.

Hsieh's work is perhaps the best case in point, its nearly unimaginable and yet mundane duration providing cover for his evasion of a series of categories upon which subjectivity is seen to depend. Hsieh's work, in fact, provides a model that sets the work of the other artists in sharp relief, in terms of the reimagining of the audience. Hsieh's near-systematic negation of subjectivity, staking out a position along the intersecting limits of economic, juridical, and political orders, in the end gives rise to a counter-intuitive and critical inversion of sovereignty. This can be seen, in particular, in relation to the dilemmas of agency enacted by Abramović (the first time around), where the gesture toward dismantling identity left audiences on such uncertain ground. Sovereignty, in this context, and after Agamben, refers to the power to suspend the law in order to create a "*relation of exception*," that is, the relation to the juridical order "by which something is included solely through its exclusion."¹³ This exception typically represents a situation in which sovereignty steps outside of the law, in order to mark the threshold on the basis of which the space of juridical order is possible.¹⁴ *Homo sacer*—the most telling contemporary example of which is the "detainee" (still in Guantánamo)—is a figure brought into being in just such a suspension, and it is telling that as an illegal alien in the U.S., Hsieh was as a matter of fact much closer to that liminal, inside/outside position than were either Burden or Abramović.

The questions that underlie the response to Hsieh's work—questions that invoke identity—are not irrelevant, but they need some re-direction. In relation to *like* and *kind*, Hsieh was in fact a very particular

kind of person—and one very much symptomatic of his time, though not in the psychological (or psychopathological) terms anticipated by such questions. Hsieh arrived in the U.S. as an illegal alien from Taiwan in 1974 and remained illegal until an amnesty in 1988.¹⁵ So for the period of the one-year performances, and over two years into *Thirteen Year Plan*, he occupied that dual position: illegal and alien. “Illegal alien” is a phrase that should not be taken for granted. An “alien” is someone who is not a citizen or national of the U.S. According to the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS), an illegal alien is one “who has entered the United States illegally and is deportable if apprehended, or an alien who entered the United States legally but who has fallen ‘out of status’ and is deportable.”¹⁶ It is interesting to note that when one begins to search for definitions of “illegal alien” on the internet, one arrives at the IRS before the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which might suggest that the category “illegal alien” is, significantly, an economic one.¹⁷ The fact that when Hsieh was illegal the INS was part of the Department of Justice but is now part of the Department of Homeland Security (that is, the definition of “illegal alien” was once a matter of justice and is now a matter of security) also seems significant. The Department of Homeland Security provides a very similar definition, but under the more consequence-oriented term “Deportable Alien.”¹⁸ What these definitions suggest, in their institutional and rhetorical frames, is a subject at that intersection of economic, juridical, and political systems mentioned above. This is confirmed in sociological terms by Saskia Sassen’s analysis of the demand for undocumented labor as an integral element of shifts in employment patterns that are consequences of the management and service requirements of globalized industries.¹⁹

The illegal alien has a curious status as a subject because he or she is so often unable either to be represented or to represent him or herself, as such (because illegal aliens as a group are necessarily officially invisible, despite the fact that their presence is not only common knowledge but economically crucial).²⁰ So, where we saw Burden and Abramović stage limit-cases of community, Hsieh from the start occupied—or rather, was ascribed—a limit-case identity. In one set of philosophical terms, the illegal alien as subject largely without rights, but nonetheless defined by the exercise of legal force, approaches

Agamben's relation of exception. As an illegal alien, Hsieh entered that relation from the opposite end of the juridical order, so to speak, but entered it nonetheless. Approaching the limit of the juridical order, Hsieh was both a non-person and a member of a legally marked category; he did not count, and yet, in the abstract at least, the authorities wanted nothing better than to count him among his like—to record and remove him, but indifferently, without imagining him.²¹ Hsieh's achievement is in part to have turned the relation of exception to his own advantage, to have used it to legitimate his own manipulations of systemic borders.

It is tempting to see a mimetic relation between Hsieh's real-life conditions and the privation, dependency, secrecy, even invisibility of his performances: an underground art economy to match the black economy of illegal aliens. Johnston quotes Hsieh on his experience in the mid-1970s when, he said, he was "'frustrated and depressed.' He didn't know anyone, his English was minimal, and he was hiding from the government. 'I was a prisoner in my studio, and felt very isolated.' The *Cage Piece*, for instance, 'was a way of making a form for how I felt.'"²² However, we can also see these conditions as providing a context of systemic instability in which to comprehend the anti-psychological, anti-subjective mode of Hsieh's practice (and its distance from what have become conventional accounts of subjectivity in performance art). For instance, what might the possible relations be, for an illegal alien, between hiding and assimilation (assimilation, or blending in, as a method of disguise, or hiding in plain sight), and between hiding and/or assimilation and the employment requirements of globalized industries (globalization, that is, produces illegal aliens)? Or, what might the relations be, for an illegal alien between the passage of time and the idea of home (as though the former might give shape to the latter), and the power of the fiction of nation in an increasingly global economy? Or, further, consider the relations between the illegal alien's necessity for discretion and artistic performance (a relation that might describe the somewhat paradoxical status of Hsieh's works as "performances"). It was in occupying such tense relations, and at such length, as if to emphasize the liminal, limit-case character of his illegal status, that Hsieh undid the kinds of categories, privacy, traits, character, personality, and attendantly, likeness, recognition, identification—and ultimately, identity—

upon which subjectivity (including that of performance art) might be seen to depend. Hsieh might be seen to have anticipated this in producing a poster—a blankly ironic self-portrait—*Wanted by U.S. Immigration Service* (1978, predating the one-year performances), which was shown during *Outdoor Piece*. In response to the question of whether this made it easier for immigration officials to find him, he subsequently answered, wryly, “I was living on the street during the time the ‘Wanted’ poster was exhibited in a group show. No officer came to find me.”²³

Hsieh’s work generated next to nothing in terms of answering questions about like and kind. Instead, it left behind a curious residue, in the form of its documentation, at once factual and elusive. Hsieh’s documentation is extensive, something that speaks directly to the after-the-factness of performance art and the shift this marks in how we conceive of the audience. The first four one-year performances were meticulously documented, the year without art and *Thirteen Year Plan* necessarily less so. Each performance was accompanied by a typed statement, dated the day of the beginning of the performance—a familiar conceptual device—and describing very plainly the plan that Hsieh would execute. All of the works generated posters, four of them with an image of Hsieh above a calendar for the year in question, which indicated when visitors might attend. For *Outdoor Piece*, a calendar for each of the four seasons identified a date and location where people could see Hsieh, and there was also a separate series of daily maps. The poster for the year without art substituted a black square for an image of Hsieh. *Thirteen Year Plan* was represented by a white square, above a list of the years 1986 to 1999.

Cage Piece was documented in situ by 365 scratch marks on the wall behind the head of the bed, 52 sets of seven vertical marks and one horizontal (the extra horizontal line marking each week as complete), plus the extra 365th day. These suggest the classic, bare indication of presence that might be associated with prison time. Hsieh scratched his name into the wall, along with a numeric representation of the dates of the performance—93078 92979—which of course suggests the prisoner’s number, but also (despite the extra numeral) a Social Security number, therefore apparently referencing different juridical categories, the resident or citizen *and* the prisoner. Of course, the former might appear as an aspiration, and the long number might be



Tehching Hsieh. *One Year Performance 1980–1981. Punching the Time Clock.*
Photograph by: Michael Shen. © 1981 Tehching Hsieh.
Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

contrasted with the rudimentary math of the scratch marks (a more basic form of accounting for oneself, perhaps). The same number appears in the series of “Life Pictures,” across the chest of Hsieh’s shirt, his dress also suggesting a prisoner’s uniform (though it appears to be white, as if to remind us of Hsieh’s innocence). The pictures are snap-

shots of Hsieh's life in the cage, which in the DVD-ROM document are linked to the scratch marks. Continuing the categorical theme suggested by the number, a witness, attorney Robert Projansky, certified at year's end that the paper seal he had inscribed at the beginning of the performance had remained unbroken until its end.

Hsieh's self-incarceration—throwing himself on the mercy of his friend Cheng Wei Kuong, who would “facilitate this piece by taking charge of my food, clothing and refuse,” though also binding that friend to his project—might seem almost abjectly mimetic of the illegal alien's circumstances, yet the underlying material conditions of the work suggest something more complex. Hsieh's privation must also be seen as the paradoxical exercise of a privilege that goes to the complex economic realities of illegal immigration: in order to perform the work (and at least the next two), Hsieh sublet part of his apartment, and also relied on the support of his parents.²⁴ Hsieh flaunted his illegality, albeit largely privately, and occupied an excessive position in relation to it, which undercut or revalued his position within juridical categories. There is clearly an asceticism—an asceticism of the will, perhaps—operating in Hsieh's practice, yet this mixture of privilege and illegality suggests the hauteur of the dandy rather than the existential grind of the stoic, insofar as its excess in relation to the art world (and the art market) might link Hsieh's initial little art community to the virtual annihilation of the public realm. This is to some extent borne out by Hsieh's statement that the audience was at once secondary and necessary.

Time Clock Piece generated perhaps the most elaborate documentation. Along with the statement and poster, there is also a typed explanation, as if to offset any suspicion of “cheating” (though of course there was no employer to be duped), which describes the witnessing procedure, the signing and sealing of the time clock, and the filming: Hsieh recorded each punch of the clock with a single frame of 16mm film, so that the 8,627 punches that Hsieh made generated a film of about six minutes; Hsieh also shaved his head at the beginning of the performance, “to help illustrate the time process,” so that the film records the growth of his hair. There is a table with a record and explanation (sleeping, typically) of the 133 punches he missed. And there are the time cards themselves: a witness, David Milne, signed a

ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE
by **TEHCHING HSIEH**



26 Sept 1981 - 26 Sept 1982

FALL
WINTER
SPRING
SUMMER

MAR. 20, 1982 AT 2:00 P.M.

BROOKLYN BRIDGE
SOUTH ST. UNDER BRIDGE

Tehching Hsieh. *One Year Performance 1981-1982*. Poster.

© 1982 Tehching Hsieh. Courtesy the artist, the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, Detroit and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

statement, dated like Hsieh's, 11 April 1980, saying that he had signed 366 time cards, and agreed not to sign any more.

Julia Bryan-Wilson has observed that the multiple traces of *Time Clock Piece* betray "an anxiety about questions of evidence. His paper trail exaggerates bureaucratic demands for strict information management and record keeping."²⁵ Not only that, but *Time Clock Piece* hyperbolizes the subjection of the worker—whom Hsieh could not legally be—to disciplinary observation. One reading of Hsieh's work would see it in a long line of avant-gardist attempts to bridge the famous gap between art and life. But given that Hsieh could never leave the immediate vicinity of the time clock (so as to be back in time for the next punch), it cannot help but seem deeply ironic that the undocumented alien's attempt to bridge this gap should collapse *both* art and life into an intense process of documentation and discipline (perhaps there is an echo here of Cheng Wei Kuong's subjection to *Cage Piece*, too). Hsieh's "work," which appears both manic and numbing, casts a pall over the idea of the United States as the "land of opportunity." And if, as Sassen's work suggests, the legal and illegal migrations of recent decades are *produced* by the needs of new globalized economic formations, Hsieh's grueling generation of pointless information enacts the confrontation between the undocumented worker's economic necessity and his or her place in a juridical no-man's land, a confrontation that leads inevitably to the political realm, and to the caprices of power. In a contemporary moment characterized at the administrative level by "detainees," warrantless surveillance, no-bid contracts, and secrecy, Hsieh's work seems more pertinent than ever.

For *Outdoor Piece*, Hsieh produced daily maps, photocopies of the same map of Manhattan with handwritten notations indicating where he slept and woke up, where he went (mostly in lower Manhattan), where he bought meals, defecated, how much he spent on food, etc. These maps, like much of Hsieh's documentation, remind us of conceptual art, although their insistence on bodily functions and everyday interactions displaces the abstract subject typical of much conceptual art. And while Hsieh seems in many respects to be anything but an ironist, the term suggests itself again, as the alien once more takes up the job of documenting himself. *Outdoor Piece* also comes with "Life Pictures," many of which depict Hsieh's adaptation to his

circumstances, while some curiously suggest normalcy asserting itself (interactions with friends, a picnic). And there is a fifty-minute film, evidently made at intervals by Hsieh and Robert Attanasio, in which we often see Hsieh performing the everyday rituals we would normally understand as private, but in an alley, under a bridge, on a pier, and so on—not quite in public, but at its margins. This in a sense captures the performance's relation to its audience, as well. Where more typically a performance artist might make him or herself the center of attention, Hsieh was instead all around.

Following from the welter of documentation of *Time Piece*, what begins to emerge in *Outdoor Piece* is the insufficiency of the documentary evidence to the brute facts of Hsieh's experience (another aspect of its economic pointlessness, its excessiveness). At a mimetic level, this might also point to the insufficiency of any representation of the brute facts of the real homelessness that became such an open sore in New York during the Reagan period, a situation that amply demonstrated the precariousness of bare life and its unequal valuations. Of course, play with the adequacy or otherwise of documentation is a staple among performance artists, and it is brought into focus by the extraordinary length of Hsieh's pieces (what is fifty minutes of film against a year, after all?). Certainly the evidence continues neither to tell us what either the experience or Hsieh was "really like," nor why Hsieh did it. Now, we might read this representational shortfall as a metaphor for the misunderstanding of the plight of those who are socially marginalized, whether illegal aliens, the poor, or the homeless. If so, however, we are again met by relations of exception that are symmetrical, antithetical counterparts to the exceptional power of sovereignty to exempt itself from law in order to define juridical territory. If not the poor (who are "always with us" like a shadow, or a repressed memory), the illegal alien and the homeless, indifferently quantified, are representatives of human biomass, "bare life," constitutively outside the political order. Agamben argues that the Aristotelian opposition between life and good life is "at the same time an implication of the first in the second, of bare life in politically qualified life. What remains to be interrogated is not merely . . . the possible articulations of the 'good life' as the *telos* of the political. We must instead ask why Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion

(which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life. What is the relation between politics and life, if life presents itself as what is included by means of an exclusion?"²⁶ In this context, it is compelling that it is in the moment in which Hsieh comes under the explicit sway of the law—taken in by the police after an altercation—that the work threatens to collapse: in part because he has to go inside, briefly, but mainly because this incident exposes the fragility (also, the potential danger) of his paradoxical freedom, or relative privilege, to conduct the performance. Rather than exaggerating his place—as in *Time Clock Piece*, where the undocumented worker demonstrated that he could work as hard as or harder than anyone else, generating his own documents—in *Outdoor Piece*, Hsieh took his non-status and ran with it, asserting his will by performing his own vulnerable near-invisibility. One witness, Joe Hannan, who was the publicist at the downtown alternative art space, The Kitchen, at the time, confirms this sense of the work: "If I recognized Tehching Hsieh on the street, I don't remember it. But I do recall someone pointing him out to me late one night in the small park at Beach Street and West Broadway in Tribeca. It was wintry, and we worried that Hsieh didn't have enough clothing."²⁷

Rope Piece also generated its share of what begins to look like "official" Hsieh documentation: poster with calendar; statement signed by both artists on 4 July 1983; statements signed by two witnesses, dated 4 July 1984, certifying that the seals on the locks securing the rope were intact until that day (ironically, again, this perverse version of a green card wedding is strung between successive Independence Days). There are "Daily Life Pictures," snapshots again, in which, as in some of the images from *Outdoor Piece*, a kind of normalcy or familiarity seems to emerge against the odds (sometimes in comical versions, one of them up a ladder, the other down, say), though there are also all the moments in which the artists look like they are preserving some kind of minimal privacy or personal space, their backs turned to one another; and there are the blank photographs, for the days on which they were fighting. Prefacing an interview with Hsieh and Montano, Alex and Allyson Grey remark of *Rope Piece* that it is "one of the most highly publicized works of performance art," but that "it retains an impenetrable privacy. No one will ever know 'what it was like' but the artists themselves."²⁸ This com-

ment reflects both the desire to know more about the artist (the desire for psychological revelation), and the representational shortfall that the documents embody.

In *Rope Piece* this shortfall—and resistance to the subjective—is rendered explicit in the final element of the documentation, the set of daily audiotapes. One or other of the two wore a Walkman at all times, to record their conversations, but these tapes were then signed and sealed, never to be listened to. If for Montano, as C. Carr reports, this was a way to be conscious they were talking, for Hsieh it symbolized communication in general, they were conceptual art tapes.²⁹ Hsieh, that is, sought to derive generality from the exigencies of a forced intimacy: if the rope literalized relationality itself, *Rope Piece* was an experiment in sociality, in communication and negotiation, but one posited by an artist who was, in terms of another, larger set of negotiations with the state, still several years away from having a leg to stand on. Claims to generality usually issue from unmarked subjects, so Hsieh's, which was explicit—"The piece was not about him with Linda," he said, "it was about all people"³⁰—seems counter-intuitive. But the right to make such claims is organized, again, in terms of art, so that *Rope Piece* comes to look like the inverse complement to the enactment of invisibility in *Outdoor Piece*: here the illegal alien, the limit-case, was literally bound within a self-regulating social network, formulated with a fine disregard for broader systemic constraints. Hsieh and Montano can be seen to have embodied the community-in-miniature that Hsieh's work began with, as a model designed to speak to community in general, where community is seen to work in communication and negotiation. Notably, however, for Hsieh, this aspect of the work failed, something he explains in terms resonant with the ethical demands of idealized accounts of community—over which his comments cast a shadow, consistent with the reservations about group formations that we have seen in the work of Acconci, Burden, and Abramović: "One needs freedom, but you need the others to coexist too. This contradiction is about the relationship between oneself and others. We fought frequently. We had a difficult time, indeed. As artists we made a powerful piece, but as human beings we were failed collaborators."³¹

Of the final *One Year Performance*—counter to the four previous, with their meticulous (if not obsessional) collections of data—there is

JULY 1, 1985

STATEMENT

I, TEHCHING HSIEH, PLAN TO DO A ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE.

I ■ NOT DO ART, NOT TALK ART, NOT SEE ART, NOT READ ART,
NOT GO TO ART GALLERY AND ART MUSEUM FOR ONE YEAR.

I ■ JUST GO IN LIFE.

THE PERFORMANCE ■ BEGIN ON JULY 1, 1985 AND CONTINUE UNTIL
JULY 1, 1986.



TEHCHING HSIEH

NEW YORK CITY

Tehching Hsieh. *One Year Performance 1985–1986. Statement.*

© 1986 Tehching Hsieh. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

barely a trace. No image. One can only imagine its effect on a private life in the abstract: if Hsieh was not to talk about art, did he have to avoid or cut off his artworld friends? Could he have the conversation about not having the conversation? Without any “Life Pictures,” without any representation or evidence at all, was there even any art? Was there any performance? Yet if we view the year without art through

the lens of Hsieh's occupation and revaluation of the relation of exception—deliberately and at great length locating himself at borderlines negatively constitutive of social order—it appears as a fitting conclusion to the series, an appropriate signing-off. Hsieh had used art as the platform for his willful exploration of systemic borders, explorations that tended, overall, to confront the juridical with the economic, so as to reveal the always-underlying political dimension. Almost incidentally, in so doing he more or less systematically hollowed out any of the kinds of person he might have been held to be: having done so, perhaps it was time to leave not only “illegal” and “alien” behind, but also “artist.”

The critical response to Hsieh's work began with the tendency to look for subjective revelation: what was Hsieh *like*, what *kind* of person was he? It began, that is, with questions of identity. Hsieh's work suggests that this depends on having attributes available for identification, whereas he was assigned only what we might see as secret attributes (illegality, alienation, marginality, otherness). Having inverted those, Hsieh was also able to abandon *like* and *kind*, staples not only of identity but, it follows, of conventional accounts of community. And he abandoned them in favor of a paradoxically sovereign relation to the systemic orders whose mutual instabilities and impositions his work itself revealed. Appropriately, though nonetheless surprisingly for that, Hsieh says that he has finished making art, and that his career consists of the five one-year performances and the final thirteen-year piece.

In this context, it is especially pertinent that Hsieh should invoke the nuclear threat during the “public report” on *Thirteen Year Plan*: “we have not made a big mistake yet, the earth is still alive.” The nuclear threat, the ultimate political exclusion of bare life, is a figure of maximum sovereignty and maximum exception. If Hsieh just “went in life” for another thirteen years (during which time, indifferently to the direction or outcome of the work, he ceased to be illegal), perhaps those thirteen years stand as a strange, ephemeral monument to what is by now the banality of the systematic exclusions that constitute relations of exception.

Those thirteen years certainly stand as an appropriate monument to the transformation of the audience that Hsieh's work imagines—a

transformation that is effectively a dissolution. Hsieh's claim for the work is that he "tried to disappear": "When an artist does works but doesn't show them in public for thirteen years, he cuts himself off from communication. This is a sort of exile. In such a situation how could he do art which would still maintain its meaning in that moment? I had this idea of disappearance: a double exile."³²

Further, he said of the connection between his final work and the preceding *No Art Piece*, that "from the fifth piece there was no way back . . . I knew that if I wanted to do art again there was only one opportunity: it had to have no public."³³ Doubling—intensifying—his own alienation, the artist abandons art, and the public. If Acconci, Burden, and Abramović undertook to dismantle the framing conditions of subjectivity—the categories of public and private, community, identity—under cover of art, it was Hsieh, in the end, who stripped that cover away. The logic by which Hsieh's position emerged from the sequence of the *One Year Performances* is tied to his status, for much of the seventies and eighties, as an "illegal alien." Yet Hsieh's gesture to abandon or refuse art is made from within art (it is made as an artist, from within the art world, in relation to an art audience). The secret work of disappearance, Hsieh has acknowledged, involved driving from New York to Seattle ("I tried to get to Alaska but didn't make it that far"): "I went to a totally strange place to start a new life. I felt like an illegal immigrant again, living just for survival, doing jobs. I had carpentry skills, but I could only find low-paid jobs. It was like going back to 1974."³⁴

On 1 January 2000, the completion of the thirteen years was celebrated by an art audience—even if that audience did not know exactly what it was doing—when Hsieh made his "public report" in New York. Hsieh's report, a poster with the list of years and a collaged text that looks like a ransom note, reads: "I kept myself alive. I passed the Dec 31, 1999." Bearing the persistence of the art audience in mind, the *No Art Piece* and *Thirteen Year Plan* together stretch the membrane between art and non-art to the point where it still exists, but no longer serves as a legitimating framework for behavior. If Hsieh translated the work of art into a life task, then he also translated the job of the audience into a life task. In this context, the reconstitution of the

audience as public or community is rendered moot: the ethical dilemmas faced by audience members challenged by artists' attempts to transform them can only be met on the very same terms in which they would be met in non-art situations. Art no longer grants anyone, artist or viewers, any exemptions.

Notes

INTRODUCTION: REIMAGINING THE AUDIENCE

- 1 Marina Abramović, "Body Art," 30.
- 2 Peter Plagens, "He Got Shot—for His Art."
- 3 Acconci made early forays into performance art in the late 1960s, as did Abramović (in 1969), but these are artists who emerged as performance artists in the 1970s, which might be seen as a kind of heyday for experimental and confrontational performance art. I am also interested in art made at a time with a fully developed protest culture, following the Civil Rights Movement, well into anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and taking place alongside the emergent Gay Rights and Women's Lib movements. There are important precursors, of course, perhaps centrally Yoko Ono, whose *Cut Piece*, which she performed four times between 1964 and 1966, provides a model for several works discussed here, especially Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974), and also Carolee Schneemann. The best discussion of *Cut Piece* is Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Remembering Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*."
- 4 Hal Foster, "Postmodernism in Parallax." Foster writes: "our consciousness of a period not only comes after the fact, it is also always in parallax. (Postmodernism, in short, is like sex[uality]: it comes too early or too late)," 6.
- 5 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 28, where Habermas also observes that this intimate domain "was the source of privateness in the modern sense of a saturated and free interiority."
- 8 In relation to feminism, see Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, and in relation to the proletarian public sphere, see Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*.
- 9 Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 161.
- 10 Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, 80.
- 11 In that context it may be seen as an attempt to wrest any residual democratic potential from the even grimmer media critique of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

- 12 Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Parts I and II," 231.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 232.
- 14 See McLuhan's earlier book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.
- 15 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 3.
- 16 Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 56, emphasis added (in the original, this entire passage is italicized).
- 17 See for instance Iris Marion Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," 300–324.
- 18 See Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*.
- 19 Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 8.
- 20 Key instances include Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*; Kate Linker, *Vito Acconci*; Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*; Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*.
- 21 For performance against modernism, see Jones, *Body Art*; for the value of witnessing, see Phelan, *Unmarked*.
- 22 Mary Kelly, "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism."
- 23 Jones, *Body Art*, 31.
- 24 Jones, *Body Art*, 18; Linker, *Vito Acconci*, 46.
- 25 Linker, *Vito Acconci*, 46, and see Jones, *Body Art*, 103, and Robyn Brentano, "Outside the Frame: Performance, Art, and Life," and Kristine Stiles, "Art and Its Objects."
- 26 *Claim* took place on 10 September 1971, the events at Attica between 9 and 13 September (the *New York Times* of 10 September reported on the inmates' hostage-taking), though Acconci was unaware of this when I interviewed him in April 1997.
- 27 This was certainly evident to Peter Plagens in the same time period in his review of Burden's work, "He Got Shot—for His Art," where he implied that Burden was exploiting the experience of soldiers in Vietnam.
- 28 Jon Bewley, "Chris Burden in Conversation with Jon Bewley," 17.
- 29 Acconci, "Performance after the Fact," 29.
- 30 Frazer Ward, "The Space around the Corner" 74.
- 31 See Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," for a brief summary, 43–44 (the principal qualification is a feminist critique of the abstraction of minimalism's phenomenological subject).
- 32 Conversation with the author, ca. 1999, confirmed via email, 5 February 2008.
- 33 Author's notes, conversation between Chris Burden and David Ross, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 8 April 1997.

- 34 Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Talking with Marina Abramović, Riding on the Bullet Train to Kitakyushu, Somewhere in Japan," 42.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 42–43; see also Liz Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the Event Score."
- 36 Jones, *Body Art*, 105–6.
- 37 Bewley, 21–22.
- 38 In a sense, this brings performance closer to other forms of art: the significance of the argument lies in relation to the emphasis on the initial moment in the literature on performance art. And this suggestion obviously runs somewhat counter to one of the most influential ideas that has emerged from performance studies, that is, Peggy Phelan's ontology of disappearance. Phelan argues that once live performance has entered reproduction, it ceases to be performance and becomes something else: "Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance," Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146. In my view of the importance of performance art's double temporality, this is a distinction that unnecessarily privileges the initial moment over its temporally extended effects, and might, ironically enough, disallow performance art from accruing meaning and value over time. However, neither is Philip Auslander's contrary view tenable, that live performance has come to be modeled on mediated performance (*Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*), again because forms of distanciation including but not limited to mediation have long been characteristic of performance art, so that mediated/unmediated is not a telling distinction. Nevertheless, it is clear that performance art, especially work made in the 1960s and 1970s that involved video, had relations to media culture more generally. Anne Wagner has written incisively about this in "Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence," 59–80.
- 39 Phelan, *Unmarked*, 149.
- 40 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.
- 41 "Dematerialization" is a rather inaccurate term derived from Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's essay, "The Dematerialization of Art," in Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, 255–76. It is taken to refer to the relative insubstantiality of conceptual art's objects, often little more than typed texts and photocopies, a deliberate strategy on the part of artists, and deployed as an element in the critique of the commodity status of the artwork.
- 42 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* 234.

- 43 Similarly, Janet Kraynak's reading of Bruce Nauman's performance tapes in terms of the operational logic of a Bakhtinian "utterance," which is explicitly social, emphasizes the intersubjectivity of dialogic exchanges that go beyond artist and viewer to the larger contexts in which utterances take place, that is, non-linguistic, or we could say extra-artistic contexts. This shifts the focus from "the viewer" to viewers in intersubjective contexts that go beyond relations with the performer alone (perhaps this is a way to think about being on Acconci's ramp with your friends), and also provides another way to think about viewers now, and then. (Kraynak, "Dependent Participation: Bruce Nauman's Environments," 22–45.)
- 44 See Jill Johnston, "Tehching Hsieh: Art's Willing Captive"; Donald Kuspit, "Chris Burden: The Feel of Power," and "Man for and against Machine"; Stuart Morgan, "Survival Kit."
- 45 Linker, *Vito Acconci*, 8; Jones, *Body Art*, 104.
- 46 See Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism"; Frazer Ward, "In Private and Public."
- 47 Ward, "In Private and Public," 44–45.
- 48 For Acconci's account of this trajectory in his career, see Ward, "The Space around the Corner."
- 49 Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," 387.
- 50 Thomas Keenan, "Windows: of Vulnerability," 132–33.
- 51 Jim Moisan, "Border Crossing: Interview with Chris Burden," 9.
- 52 This was not the Deleuzean "masochistic contract" of which Kathy O'Dell has written: it required a more manipulated suspension of judgment. O'Dell argues that "the crucial implication" of "masochistic" performances, "concerns the everyday agreements—or contracts—that we all make with others but that may not be in our own best interests" (*Contract with the Skin*, 2).
- 53 For a detailed account of *Cut Piece*, see Bryan-Wilson, "Remembering Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*."
- 54 Thomas McEvelley, "Marina Abramović/Ulay, Ulay/Marina Abramović," 52.
- 55 Marina Abramović, "Solo Performances 1969–1976," 68.
- 56 Ward, "The Space around the Corner," 67.
- 57 A work that featured a long table in the gallery and recorded voices that suggested a realm of public or communal debate, except that table extended out of the window of the Sonnabend Gallery over the New York street like a diving board, countering idealism with the realities of city life.
- 58 Acconci, "Making Public: The Writing and Reading of Public Space."
- 59 *Ibid.*

- 60 Jose Antonio Sarmiento, "Chris Burden: Interview with Jose Antonio Sarmiento," 56.
- 61 B. Latané and J. M. Darley, *The Unresponsive Bystander*.
- 62 Sarmiento, 56.
- 63 Abramović, "Body Art," 30.

ONE: PERFORMANCE AFTER MINIMALISM

- 1 There are, of course, exceptions. These include Bruce Barber, "Indexing: Conditionalism and Its Heretical Equivalents"; Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s*; Yvonne Rainer, "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A."
- 2 Yvonne Rainer is a key figure here, see for instance Carrie Lambert, "Other Solutions." For Morris's engagement with performance (his *Passageway*, 1961, for example, held at Yoko Ono's loft), see James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, and Kimberley Paice, "Catalogue."
- 3 Examples include Alexander Alberro, "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966–1977"; Gregory Battcock, ed., *Idea Art: A Critical Anthology*; Lizzie Borden, "Three Modes of Conceptual Art"; Lucy Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*; Ursula Meyer, ed., *Conceptual Art*; Cindy Nemser, "Subject-Object: Body Art"; Willoughby Sharp, "Body Works"; Frazer Ward, "Some Relations between Conceptual and Performance Art." More expressive work has been seen in terms of a loose tradition of "actions," seen to derive from abstract expressionism. This was one premise of the exhibition "Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949–1979," curated by Paul Schimmel, *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949–1979*, see Schimmel, "Leap into the Void: Performance and the Object." See also Robert Hughes, "The Decline and Fall of the Avant-Garde." As regards Chris Burden's work, however, such a premise seems unnecessarily essentializing, and ignores anti-expressive aspects of the work, including its systematicity.
- 4 It is true that there is considerable literature on the relations between conceptual and performance art, but the relations between performance and the minimalist public, which are central to my argument, have not been adequately addressed. Minimalism, at least insofar as its legacy is worked out in performance art, was in my view more critically engaged with notions of the public, of audience, and of community than conceptual art, which, despite its own democratizing claims, struggled to define an audience or community beyond an avant-gardist one. Certainly, as against conceptual art's public, minimalism's public, with all its flaws, depended upon *embodied* experience, however generalized.

- 5 Conversation with Bruce Barber, quoted in Barber, "Indexing," 197.
- 6 Author's interview with the artist, 16 April 1997.
- 7 Sarmiento, "Chris Burden: Interview with Jose Antonio Sarmiento," 57. Burden had also referred to his pre-performance work as "minimal sculpture" in 1979, Jim Moisan, "Border Crossing: Interview with Chris Burden," 9.
- 8 Anne M. Wagner, "Reading *Minimal Art*," 9.
- 9 See for instance Kate Linker, *Vito Acconci*, 7.
- 10 For details of differences among the central figures of minimalism, see Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*; Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism"; James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*.
- 11 See Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism."
- 12 Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," 231.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 The work of Hans Haacke is exemplary here, especially given the early awareness of minimalism, and its limitations, signaled by his *Condensation Cube* (1963).
- 15 In "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," Rosalind Krauss argued that the logic of the space of postmodernist practice was organized "through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation." (Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 289.)
- 16 Hal Foster has observed that "minimalism did prompt a concern with time as well as an interest in reception in process art, body art, performance, site-specific work, and so on" ("The Crux of Minimalism," 42). Miwon Kwon has written of the aesthetic experiments that were to follow minimalism "through the 1970s (that is, land/earth art, process art, installation art, Conceptual art, performance/body art, and various forms of institutional critique)." (Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," 87.) Earlier, Robert Pincus-Witten's six-page introduction to *Postminimalism* (1977) was a kind of expanded version of one of these lists, and in 1973, in her assessment of the "dematerialization" of the art work, Lucy Lippard wrote, "'Eccentric Abstraction,' 'Anti-Form,' 'Process Art,' 'Anti-Illusionism,' or whatever, did come about as a reaction against . . . minimal art," Lippard, *Six Years*, 5, and she went on to give a number of parenthetical lists of names of artists involved in different aspects of "dematerialized" practice. Minimalism's centrality is contested, of course, even by historians who recognize its importance (this characteristically involves revaluing upwards one of the subsidiary terms). Rosalyn Deutsche, for instance, has recognized minimalism's importance for demonstrating that perception depends on context, but criticized what she sees

- as a formalist assumption that the sites of aesthetic perception are neutral: “A more decisive shift . . . occurred when artists broadened the concept of site to embrace not only the aesthetic context of a work’s exhibition but the site’s symbolic, social and political meanings as well as the historical circumstances within which artwork, spectator, and place are situated.” (Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, 162.)
- 17 “It seems crucial to remember that the oppositions within the formation of Conceptual Art arose partly from the different readings of Minimal sculpture.” (Benjamin Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” 108.)
- 18 “At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act. . . . What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.” (Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 25.) Just such an interpretation of Pollock’s work provided what was in my view the false ontological ground for Pollock’s centrality to the expansive performance-related exhibition, “Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949–1979,” which included both Acconci and Burden. Curator Paul Schimmel wrote that Pollock “transformed the artist’s role from that of a bystander outside of the canvas to that of an actor whose very actions were its subject” (“Leap into the Void,” 18). Obviously, however, this is based on a spurious distinction: the artist may have been “outside of the canvas,” but he or she was hardly a “bystander,” any more than Pollock was actually “inside” the canvas, or *solely* concerned with his own actions there.
- 19 This distinction goes to the definition of “movement.” Chris Burden, for instance, has said that in the 1970s he “felt an affinity with a group of artists in the San Francisco area, composed of Terry Fox, Tom Marioni, Howard Fried, Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim and Gordon Matta-Clark” (Sarmiento, 58). These artists (not, in fact, uniformly based on the west coast) might be seen to have formed a “scene,” especially as their work was supported by the New York journal *Avalanche*. There might have been a concentration of energies during the period of the journal’s existence in the early 1970s, but it remains hard to see how it could be useful to constitute, say, “1970s post-minimalist performance” as an avant-gardist movement, while its status as something that underscores the exclusive and approximate character of histories grounded in such movements might, in fact, be quite productive.
- 20 At the same time, this is not at all to deny any use to a term like minimalism, or to suppose that formal considerations are irrelevant. In *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s*, Maurice Berger has argued that the conventional, art-historically validated version of minimalism is his-

toricist and formalist, and that “rather than being part of a specific movement or canon Morris’s work of the 1960s and early 1970s”—including as it did a wide range of objects, styles and performances—“is decidedly independent and even marginal” (4). This is all very well (it is probably true that Morris has been unduly criticized, if not exactly marginalized, for his anti- or post-modernist variety), but it in fact serves to reify that conventional version of minimalism, without allowing Morris’s related work to impinge upon it, and the suppression of formal considerations in the name of the social leads to equally unfortunate generalizations and analogies: “The ‘Minimalist’ desire for pure experience independent of memory or logic”—a dubious description at best—“recalls the New Left’s demand for liberation from society’s oppressive conventions and standards” (Berger, *Labyrinths*, 12).

- 21 Hence such sweeping statements as the performance artist and curator Martha Wilson’s: “The body is the new art medium of this century, ‘discovered’ by way of the text by visual artists.” (Wilson, “Performance Art: (Some) Theory and (Selected) Practice at the End of This Century,” 2.) More extremely, art historian and performance artist Kristine Stiles, in an encyclopedic essay, has written: “By showing the myriad ways that action itself couples the conceptual to the physical, the emotional to the political, the psychological to the social, the sexual to the cultural, and so on, action art makes evident the all-too-often-forgotten interdependence of human subjects—of people—one to another. The body is the medium of the Real, however multifarious that Real becomes and is manifest. By making this interconnection itself material, action art renders both the relationality of individuals within the frame of art and culture visible. In this way, action in art *acts* for all Art—for better or worse—to bring the relation between seeing and meaning, making and being, into view.” (Stiles, “Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions,” 227–28.)
- 22 Rosalind Krauss, “Sense and Sensibility: Reflections on Post 60s Sculpture,” 48. Note that Krauss also saw as characteristic of the period “the discovery of the body as a complete externalization of the Self” (49), but without reference to performance.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 47 [emphasis in original].
- 24 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 25 Reminiscent of the formality and abstraction of Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere, as discussed in the Introduction.
- 26 Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” 58.
- 27 Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 71. Krauss had made a similar argument in “Sense and Sensibility,” where she wrote that in “illusionistic painting, ‘space’ functions as a category which exists prior to the knowl-

- edge of things within it. It is in that sense a model of a consciousness which is the ground against which objects are constituted" (46).
- 28 Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 71.
- 29 Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," 232.
- 30 Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," 50. Here Foster refers to Morris's "Notes on Sculpture," 233.
- 31 Donald Judd, "In the Galleries," 90. See Kimberley Paice, "Catalogue," 106.
- 32 Judd, "In the Galleries," 165.
- 33 Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," 40.
- 34 Barbara Rose, "A B C Art," 280.
- 35 This intersection might provide another sense, in addition to Foster's, of minimalism as a "crux."
- 36 "A B C Art," 293. Rose's examples, however, are a little puzzling, as nudity has rarely been absent from art, and intention has often been subject to debate.
- 37 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 120.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 127, original emphasis.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 136–37. In this pathologizing vein, Fried also referred to the meaning and the hidden quality of minimalism's anthropomorphism as "incurable" (130).
- 40 Hence the inconsistency and contortion of Fried's claim that minimalism has an audience of one: "inasmuch as literalist work *depends on* the beholder, is *incomplete* without him, it *has* been waiting for him," so one only has to enter a room where it is, "to *become* that beholder, that audience of one." *Ibid.*, 140, original emphasis.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 146.
- 42 It seems clear from the explicitly moralizing direction of Fried's text that magic and morality went together: the viewer who got it—specifically, who got what Fried got—was posited as morally superior.
- 43 Here, it might be suggested that Fried was at some level at least as interested in the viewer's (or his own) drive to believe, as in the viewer's being compelled to do so.
- 44 Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility," 46.
- 45 Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," 230–31.
- 46 Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," 151.
- 47 Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 117. Curiously, Fried goes out of his way to assert—without offering an explanation—that the movies, by their very nature, escape theatre: "Exactly how the movies escape theatre is a beautiful question" (140).
- 48 Note the absence of the term "art," from this formulation, Judd, "Specific

- Objects,” 184. Judd continued in terms reminiscent of Morris’s interest in an object’s *gestalt*: “The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting” (187).
- 49 Foster, “The Crux of Minimalism,” 43.
- 50 Krauss, “Sense and Sensibility,” 49, emphasis added.
- 51 It is perhaps worth noting that the externality of the medium of painting to Pollock renders these positions less far apart than the intensity of the critical battle joined over them might suggest.
- 52 Foster, “The Crux of Minimalism,” 47, 54.
- 53 Krauss, “Sense and Sensibility,” 49.
- 54 It might be argued that the critical reception of minimalism has paid a surprising amount of attention to the artists’ own analyses of their work, especially given that much of this rhetoric tends, at the same time, to deny authorial privilege.
- 55 “Notes on Sculpture,” 233.
- 56 Foster has noted this problem: “for minimalism considers perception in phenomenological terms, as somehow before or outside history, language, sexuality, and power. In other words, it does not regard the subject as a sexed body positioned in a symbolic order any more than it regards the gallery or museum as an ideological apparatus” (“The Crux of Minimalism,” 43).
- 57 This reading points toward minimalism’s relation to the subsequent art of institutional critique. Yet in distinguishing between different modes of conceptual art after minimalism, often seen as closely related to institutional critique, Krauss saw one group, including Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, On Kawara, and Joseph Kosuth, as placing art “within the confines of what Logical Positivism has called the protocol language—the language of sense-impression, mental images, and private sensations. It is a language implying that no outside verification is possible of the meanings of words we use to point to our private experience” (“Sense and Sensibility,” 46). In this sense, for Krauss, these artists had not learned the lessons of minimalism, because their work remained bound to an internalized version of intention.
- 58 According to Rolf B. Meyersohn, citing a 1956 survey, “television’s expansion in the first ten years of its life has been relentless. By now almost three-quarters of all the homes in this country are equipped with a TV set and approximately 75 million adults watch it for an average of over eighteen hours a week.” Meyersohn, “Social Research in Television,” 345, and see note 3, 355: “According to a survey conducted through the Advertising Research Foundation, 35,495,330 out of a total of 48,784,000 households in the U.S. are equipped with television (as of March 1956).” See Rosenberg

- and White, *Mass Culture*, 345–87, for an overview of early sociological research on the effects of television. I am grateful to Anne M. Wagner for drawing this material to my attention in “Video and the Here and Now.”
- 59 Foster, “The Crux of Minimalism,” 43.
- 60 On *Untitled (Corner Piece)*, see Annette Michelson, “Robert Morris: An Aesthetic of Transgression.”
- 61 Vito Acconci, “Power Field—Exchange Points—Transformations,” 62.
- 62 For example Linker, *Vito Acconci*, 44–46.
- 63 Sarmiento, 57.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 65 Burden, *Chris Burden: A Twenty Year Survey*, 48.
- 66 Christopher Knight also observes that the lockers, “as a repetition of industrially-manufactured, stacked geometric units, were unmistakable as a reference to Minimalist sculpture.” (“Chris Burden and the Potential for Catastrophe,” 15.)
- 67 Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 282.
- 68 Mary Kelly, “Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism,” 95.
- 69 For instance, Willoughby Sharp, “Body Works”; Cindy Nemser, “Subject-Object: Body Art”; Lea Vergine, *Il Corpo Come Linguaggio*.
- 70 Regarding permission, Burden has said “I knew if I asked they wouldn’t let me do it. And if I asked it would imply that they had the power to tell me I couldn’t do it, and they didn’t have the power.” (Sharp and Béar, “Chris Burden: The Church of Human Energy, An Interview by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar,” 59.) Elsewhere, Burden reported hearing rumors that on the fourth day, “the Dean of the University, whose office was on the top floor of the building expressed concern and the possibility of having to utilize the campus police to forcibly remove me from the locker” (Sarmiento, “Chris Burden: Interview with Jose Antonio Sarmiento,” 53).
- 71 Burden subsequently heard “that many of the New York based art historians, who were on the faculty at the time, opposed granting me a degree. Other faculty members, such as Robert Irwin, were adamant and insisted on granting me an MFA. In the end, I did get my degree.” *Ibid.*
- 72 Sharp and Béar, “The Church of Human Energy,” 54.
- 73 White, “Chris Burden: Interview with Robin White,” 17.

TWO: ACCONCI

- 1 Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 117.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 144.
- 3 Moira Gatens, “Power, Bodies and Difference,” 124.
- 4 Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality*, 122–23.

- 5 Acconci, "Body as Place—Moving in on Myself, Performing Myself," 16.
- 6 Original description provided by the artist. It is perhaps worth noting that nobody actually went to Acconci's apartment to see the performance. Interview with the artist, 16 April 1997.
- 7 Acconci, "Body as Place," 21, emphasis added.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 As if to support the contention that a model of subjectivity dependent on the public/private split outlived that distinction, in *Service Area*, Acconci's work crossed paths, in a sense, with Habermas's account of the development of the bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe. In that account, private letters and the epistolary novel played a crucial role, allowing for the rehearsal of what was then a new form of subjectivity: "The diary became a letter addressed to the sender, and the first-person narrative became a conversation with one's self addressed to another person. These were experiments with the subjectivity discovered in the close relationships of the conjugal family" (Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 49, and see 49–51).
- 11 This has been examined in work dealing, like Acconci's, with the institutions of art, particularly the museum. See Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*; Andreas Huyssen, "Escape from Amnesia: The Museum as Mass Medium." It has also been one of the subjects of studies of mass culture, including Mary Anne Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," 222–39, and Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject." These examples suggest that what is banal is not necessarily benign, as does the extensive body of feminist scholarship on the public/private split as it affects reproductive rights (for example Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*). Further, regarding differences between perceptions of the effects of the interpenetration of public and private in the late 1960s and the 1990s, the late 1960s enthusiasm for Marshall McLuhan's utopian account of mass media providing for the extension of human agency in the form of a prosthetic global brain, in *Understanding Media*, is to be contrasted with Mark Seltzer's altogether bleaker recent accounts of relations between humans and machines. Seltzer describes a fantasmatic logic of the mediation of subjectivity by technology, which from one point of view "projects a violent dismemberment of the natural body and an emptying out of human agency," while at the same time, "from another it projects a transcendence of the natural body and the extension of human agency through the forms of technology that represent it. This is precisely the double logic of prosthesis and it is also the double logic of a

- sheer culturalism that posits that the individual is something that can be made.” (Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 157.)
- 12 Perhaps this should come as no surprise, given that access to the public sphere was always dependent on private ownership of property and, whatever its other, broader, ideal or heuristic functions, it served the interests of the property-owning class. The fictional and ideological aspects of the subject of the public sphere were acknowledged by Habermas in an italicized passage: “*The fully developed bourgeois public sphere was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple*” (*Structural Transformation*, 56).
- 13 Acconci, “Peopled Space—Performing Myself through Another Agent,” 43.
- 14 Linker, *Vito Acconci*, 9.
- 15 Perhaps it might be argued that Acconci achieved, instead, a cynical distance, such that the impropriety of his behaviors was in fact the sign of his conformity to a new or emerging norm of “critical” practice.
- 16 Linker, *Vito Acconci*, 7.
- 17 Acconci, “Power Field—Exchange Points—Transformations,” 62.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Linker quotes a statement by Acconci that his work is “about the presentation of a self—a person, not about my life” (*Vito Acconci*, 9). But Acconci has not assumed that he could be neatly separated from that person. He allowed in 1972 that he was obsessed with his own autobiography, “in the sense that I can use it for the structure—not so much for any autobiographical purposes. It’s so logical for me to use it, because in any interactive situation, I’ve got to present one agent. It seems that as long as the art context involves a specific artist having a show, and in this case me, the only way to use the exhibition space is to make it available for me. In other words, don’t deny that it’s me that’s having the show.” (Liza Béar, “Excerpts from Tapes with Liza Béar,” 77.) Later, he would write in the context of an exhibition of his public art projects, that “one function of public art is to undo the construction of a self.” (Acconci, “Artist’s Statements,” 31.)
- 20 Linker, for instance, provides a scrupulous reading of *Seedbed*, in terms of the social psychology of Erving Goffman, for example *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and *Interaction Ritual* (1967), and in Kurt Lewin’s *Principles of Topological Psychology* (1936). Goffman essentially argued that identity was produced in social interaction, while Lewin conceptualized behavior spatially, in terms of the interactions between

psychological “regions.” (Linker, *Vito Acconci*, 30–35, 44–48.) Linker suggests, persuasively, that these interests opened onto Acconci’s explorations of audience relations. However, neither Linker nor Goffman nor Lewin consider interaction rituals, power fields, etc., specifically in relation to any broader conception of the public sphere, which is the concern that I develop here.

- 21 Interview with the artist, 16 April 1997.
- 22 Hence, despite a general equation between postmodernism and post-structuralist theory that reels off French proper names (Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan . . .), there remains a range of different and competing versions of postmodernism. Among them is Habermas’s account of postmodernism, essentially, as a return of the surrealists’ mistaken opposition to the project of modernity, an opposition that in its attempt “to level art and life, fiction and praxis, appearance and reality to one plane,” failed to comprehend the level of social differentiation with which it contended, and so failed to see that “when the containers of an autonomously developed cultural sphere are shattered, the contents get dispersed. Nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form; an emancipatory effect does not follow.” (Habermas, “Modernity—An Incomplete Project,” 11.) For Jean-François Lyotard, in a polemic against Habermas’s concern with consensual normativity via communicative action, the outstripping of science by technology in late capitalism has led to the collapse of master narratives, requiring the reorientation of communication, and aesthetic practice, in a situation in which there are no longer any preexisting rules of legitimation. See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

Fredric Jameson, on the other hand, has become identified as a leading theorist of postmodernism largely by refusing to define it, so that arguments for and against postmodernism are seen as symptomatic of subjective relations to late capitalism. However, he has argued in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* “that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thoroughgoing and all-pervasive. This means that the expression late capitalism carries the other, cultural half of my title within it as well; not only is it something like a literal translation of the other expression, postmodernism, its temporal index seems already to direct attention to changes in the quotidian and on the cultural level as well” (xxi). It may be this collapse of the traditional Marxist relation between base and superstructure that has allowed Jameson to be associ-

ated with a postmodernism characterized by schizoid subjective relations to the world, and by pastiche, in the realm of culture.

In a sense, it is in response to the still-confident and general use of “we,” by (frequently male) theorists like Jameson, or, in the realm of art, for instance, Clement Greenberg or Michael Fried, that there emerges an account of postmodernism to which feminism is central. As Hal Foster has noted, “the critique of representation is of course associated with poststructuralist theory” (“Postmodernism: A Preface,” xiv), but it is not bound solely to that. Feminism’s introduction of heterogeneity to the supposedly homogeneous narrative of modernity (an introduction which suggested that narrative was only ever ideologically homogeneous), by means of formerly suppressed voices, narratives, and representations, stands as the model for the introduction into “legitimate” culture of a range of other, “other” representations. Mary Kelly, among others, has argued for this: while feminism did not generate a “unified aesthetic” as it emerged in the 1970s, “it infiltrated or overtly influenced every art (or un-art-) making process of that moment in distinct and irreversible ways: notably, by transforming the phenomenological presence of the body into an image of sexual difference, extending the interrogation of the object to include the subjective conditions of its existence, turning political intent into personal accountability, and translating institutional critique into the question of authority. In this sense, feminism’s impact was not marginal but central to the formation of modernism’s ‘post’ condition.” (Kelly, “Introduction: Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,” xxiii.

- 23 See Linker, “Representation and Sexuality.”
- 24 For Habermas, this is in part a result of the interpenetration of public and private (which led to the structural transformation of the public sphere), as market forces came to dominate the public sphere, as well as commodity exchange. See *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 161. Consequently, in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas effectively replaced the distinction between public and private with the more radical split between system and lifeworld, and abandoned the notion of a sphere in which the relations between the two could be negotiated in a common language: “The uncoupling of system and lifeworld is experienced in modern society as a particular kind of objectification: the social system definitively bursts out of the horizon of the lifeworld, escapes from the intuitive knowledge of everyday communicative practice, and is henceforth accessible only to the counterintuitive knowledge of the social sciences developing since the eighteenth century.” (*The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2, 173.*)

- 25 The Oedipal triangle as conceived of by Freud may always have been complicated by the roles played by other relatives and servants, especially nurses and nannies. See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Statements by such philosophers as Jean Baudrillard, to the effect that this or that historical event did not happen, or, that it only happened in the media, may have a striking rhetorical effect, but they tend to deny one of the central questions that Acconci was dealing with, that is, what is the relation between an event—undeniably if not authoritatively experienced by a subject—and its mediation? See Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*.
- 26 Béar, “Excerpts from Tapes with Liza Béar,” 76.
- 27 Acconci, “Peopled Space,” 31.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 This despite Acconci’s comment that in *Following Piece* his space and time were being controlled: “I’m following a person, but I’m certainly not a spy, I’m being dragged along” (Béar, “Excerpts from Tapes with Liza Béar,” 72), for Acconci did at least choose to follow someone.
- 31 Acconci, “Peopled Space,” 31.
- 32 Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 131, 136.
- 33 Deutsche, *Evictions*, 56.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 57
- 35 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 In work made in the 1970s and 1980s that was clearly related, if not indebted, to Acconci’s, the French artist Sophie Calle produced equally, if differently unsettling effects by pursuing her subjects into private spaces. In her “following piece,” *Suite vénitienne*, Calle used disguises and photography with the goal of obtaining “information her subjects assume is hidden or believe to be private.” Deborah Irmas, “The Camouflage of Desire,” 7. *The Shadow* (1981) reversed this: “At my request my mother, Rachel S., went to the ‘Duluc’ detective agency. She hired them to follow me, to report my daily activities, and to provide photographic evidence of my existence” (*Sophie Calle: A Survey*, 25, and see 24–27); see also descriptions of other pieces that involved intruding upon or exposing the presumed privacy of strangers, including *The Hotel* (1981), in which Calle, working as a chambermaid, documented details of hotel guests’ lives (28–37), and *L’Homme au Carnet* (1983), in which she conducted interviews about someone who was a stranger to her, with people listed in his lost address book, which were subsequently published in *Libération* (38–43).
- 38 Béar, “Excerpts from Tapes with Liza Béar,” 70.

- 39 Acconci, "Peopled Space," 35 (emphasis added). Retooling his presence in accord with the clock, or attempting to, Acconci, whose work betrays a certain suspicion of depth psychology, nonetheless crossed paths with some remarks of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, regarding Descartes. Lacan said of Descartes: "it took quite a bit for him to begin to think of the body as a machine. . . . What in particular it took was for there to be one which not only worked by itself, but which could embody in a quite striking way something essentially human. . . . The machine I'm talking about is the clock." *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II*, 73. For Lacan, machines "go much further in the direction of what we are in reality, further even than the people who build them suspect" (74). In these terms, *Second Hand* might be seen as an attempt to embody, as machines do, for Lacan, "the most radical symbolic activity of man" (74), although the somewhat abject quality of the attempt might also be seen as a comment on the very idea of "man," or the "essentially human."
- 40 With regard to Taylorization, Lacan observes that energy, and particularly calculations of energy, require machines: "Energy . . . is a notion which can only emerge once there are machines." *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II*, 75.
- 41 Acconci, "Body as Place," 15.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 Interview with the artist, 16 April 1997. "Ludicrous" was a term used by Acconci.
- 44 Acconci, "Body as Place," 20.
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 47 Mary Kelly, "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism," 95.
- 48 Acconci, "Body as Place," 27.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 In her book on transvestism, for instance, Marjorie Garber insists that "*transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself.*" [emphasis in original] *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, 17.
- 52 White, "Vito Acconci: Interview with Robin White," 15, emphasis added. It is hard to imagine that Jasper Johns' various targets, especially those accompanied by indices of the body, were not a prompt or support for this line of thought.
- 53 The same day, the front page of the *New York Times* carried a headline, "Convicts Revolt at Attica, Hold 32 Guards Hostage," beginning the

newspaper's coverage of the infamous standoff that would end the following Monday, when Governor Nelson Rockefeller authorized a military assault in which thirty-one prisoners and nine hostage guards were killed. There seems to be a curious coincidence between the prisoners' occupation of space and publicity at the same time as Acconci's, but Acconci was unaware of the coincidence, when I interviewed him on 16 April 1997.

- 54 Acconci, "Concentration—Container—Assimilation," 55.
- 55 Vito Acconci, "Some Notes on Illegality in Art," 69–70.
- 56 Vito Acconci, "Performance after the Fact," 28. Acconci continued: "Painting and sculpture had the power of the One True God of Art; performance was a way to intrude, in the middle of a single-belief system, the swarm of multiple gods. This purpose might have been equally served by any old alternative medium, but not quite; what performance did was more specific and more pointed, or maybe just more blunt—performance functioned not as an addition to other media but as a takeover, a replacement. Into the art space, into a world of objects and things, performance let the body loose, like a bull in a china shop: into a world of representation, performance introduced fact—into a world of mind, performance introduced flesh—into a world of universals, performance introduced the vulnerability of universals, performance introduced transience" (28–29).
- 57 Acconci, "Some Notes on Illegality in Art," 71.
- 58 Acconci, "Performance after the Fact," 29.
- 59 Acconci, "Some Notes on Illegality in Art," 70.
- 60 Interview with the artist, 16 April 1997.
- 61 Acconci, "Performance after the Fact," 29.
- 62 Acconci, "Some Notes on Illegality in Art," 70.
- 63 This is also true of museums, in which Acconci performed works including *Service Area* (1970, "Information," The Museum of Modern Art, New York) and *Proximity Piece* (1970, "Software," The Jewish Museum, New York). But in the case of museums, forms of publicity that represent the institution in particular ways substitute for private profit. Representative publicity is described by Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 5–13. For the hybrid status of museums in the public sphere, see my "The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity."
- 64 Acconci, "Performance after the Fact," 29.
- 65 Linker, *Vito Acconci*, 47.
- 66 For a succinct version of this definition, see Anne Marsh, *Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia*: "Performance art can best be described as a form of art that happens at a particular time in a particular place where

the artist engages in some sort of activity, usually before an audience. The main difference between performance art and other modes of visual art practice, such as painting, photography, and sculpture, is that it is a temporal event or action” (7). The status of documentation, especially photographic documentation, is something of a commonplace in discussions of performance art, and it tends to resolve into two opposed positions. Either you had to be there, so that the simultaneous presence of performer and audience was definitive, or you didn’t, and the event was as much a pretext for its documentation as anything. For a strong version of the former, see C. Carr’s evocations of her experiences of performances from the late 1970s into the 1990s in *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century*. For the latter, Acconci himself has reflected on the “world” of performance art that “it turned out to be after all only visual, the action might as well have been a picture (that’s the way it was going to be historically preserved anyway)” (Acconci, “Performance after the Fact,” 31). As I have argued, it is clear that in much performance art, the simultaneous reproduction of the work and its subsequent distribution were integral to it, so that the relation between the event and its documentation must at least be allowed to remain in tension. It seems preferable at the very least to let the uncertain status of the photographs do some work.

- 67 The continuing appeal of the model of subjectivity grounded in the public/private split may be further indicated by the recurrence of these paradoxical hidey holes in Acconci’s work, with their hint of childhood games, however mutated.
- 68 Here it might be remarked that the translation of Habermas’s “Öffentlichkeit” as “public sphere” spatializes a term that more precisely refers to the quality of “publicness.” But because the public sphere has a mediating function, this spatialization is not without metaphorical advantages.
- 69 As Liza Béar observed, Acconci was “putting on an act . . . putting on a show. . . . It has a place and time and people come to see it” (Béar, “Excerpts from Tapes with Liza Béar,” 73).
- 70 One of the guises of performance art, in Acconci’s subsequent reflection, was “this is happening with you the viewer as part of it, as if we’ve all been together for a long time” (Acconci, “Performance after the Fact,” 29).
- 71 However small and familiar the micro-communities of avant-garde art, that is, the artist’s friends may talk to other people the artist doesn’t know.
- 72 Deutsche, *Evictions*, 273.
- 73 Acconci, “Performance after the Fact,” 28.
- 74 Leo Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” *Other Criteria: Confrontations with*

Twentieth-Century Art, 55–91. In this exemplary debate with Clement Greenberg, in which he proffers Robert Rauschenberg’s “flatbed picture plane” as “part of a shakeup which contaminates all purified categories” (91), that is, Kantian or Greenbergian categories, Steinberg implicitly addresses one of the functions of the public sphere. Referring to the flatbed as “the foundation of an artistic language that would deal with a *different order of experience*” (85, emphasis added), Steinberg adumbrates, as he participates in it, the process in which orders of experience are publicized and may enter the public sphere.

- 75 In the terms of Habermas’s later work, influenced by systems theory: “a progressively rationalized lifeworld is both uncoupled from and made dependent upon increasingly complex, formally organized domains of action, like the economy and the state administration. This dependency, resulting from the mediatization of the lifeworld by system imperatives, assumes the sociopathological form of an internal colonization when critical disequilibria in material reproduction—that is, systemic crises amenable to systems-theoretical analysis—can be avoided only at the cost of disturbances in the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld, that is, of ‘subjectively’ experienced, identity-threatening crises or pathologies.” Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 2, 305.
- 76 Here, the effect of the relation between and the combination of public opinion and media coverage of the battlefield, while not quantifiable, has to be considered. While it may be debatable precisely what effect “taking it to the streets” had, in relation to the end of the Vietnam War, it certainly did not go unnoticed or entirely without effect. This point is supported by a comparison between the effects of mass media coverage of demonstrations against the Vietnam War, combined with battlefield imagery, and the mass media’s virtually seamless acquiescence in two Gulf Wars, coverage of which practically suppressed demonstrations against the war, while the state censored accurate battlefield information in favor of the famous and false display of technological mastery.
- 77 In this context, it is significant that the anti-Vietnam movement borrowed or learned its tactics from the Civil Rights Movement, for whose members, denied access to the public sphere by the state, mass demonstrations were often a dangerous last resort.
- 78 Given the earlier discussion of the question of medium, in particular, it is worth noting that the film’s title alludes to Marshall McLuhan’s typology of media, ranging from hot to cold. See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 22–32.
- 79 Acconci, “Performance after the Fact,” 29.
- 80 Acconci, “Some Notes on Illegality in Art,” 70–71.

- 81 Acconci, "Performance after the Fact," 28. Note, coincidentally, the mention of convention centers; the political convention was already, in 1968, a site of acclamation rather than more formal debate.
- 82 Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal, "On Art and Artists: Interview with Vito Acconci," 27–28.

THREE: BURDEN

- 1 See Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 227–29.
- 2 Chris Burden, "Original Texts 1971–1995."
- 3 "In *Shoot* I was supposed to have a grazed wound. We didn't even have any band-aids." Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar, "Chris Burden: The Church of Human Energy, An Interview by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar," 54.
- 4 Barbara Burden is credited as the videographer in the initially self-published video tape, Chris Burden, *Documentation of Selected Works 1971–1974*.
- 5 According to Burden he is continually being asked about it (author's notes, Chris Burden in conversation with David Ross, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 8 April 1997), and this is borne out in even the most cursory reading of interviews with Burden and commentaries on his work.
- 6 Among Burden's works, perhaps only *Trans-Fixed* (23 April 1974), in which Burden's hands were nailed to the roof of a Volkswagen beetle, crucifixion-style, while the stationary car's engine was run till it screamed, matches its extremity. In fact it is notable, in this regard, in performance art as a whole. Among works that are not explicitly couched in terms of sadism or masochism (for instance, the work of Bob Flanagan), it is perhaps only exceeded by the Italian artist Gina Pane's works in which she cut herself with razor blades. See Kathy O'Dell, "The Performance Artist as Masochistic Woman," 96–97. There is a clearly gendered distinction between them, as Burden's performances tended to involve such conventionally masculine accoutrements as guns and cars. Pane's works, ostensibly dealing with the psychic effects of patriarchal representations of women, seem at an empathic level more distressing, perhaps because her actions on her own body were not mediated by such elaborate tools, or by the consequent necessity of collaborators. It is possible that Pane's work seems more distressing in part because it is so literal in its engagement with the representation of women.
- 7 Note also the suggestion of the work's *efficiency*: "I also believe that *Shoot* is a very elegant and precise artwork, in that it was a major artwork, which captured the public's imagination, and was executed with minimal means in an extremely short period of time" (Sarmiento, "Chris Burden: Interview with Jose Antonio Sarmiento," 56).

- 8 Plagens, “He Got Shot—for His Art,” D3.
- 9 Sharp and Béar, “The Church of Human Energy,” 58.
- 10 Kathy O’Dell, “Toward a Theory of Performance Art: An Investigation of Its Sites.”
- 11 Plagens, “He Got Shot—for His Art,” D3.
- 12 Donald Kuspit, “Man for and against Machine,” 59, 63, 71, 73.
- 13 Peter Noever, “Assault on Art,” in *Chris Burden: Beyond the Limits*, 11.
- 14 Johannes Lothar Schröder, “Science, Heat and Time: Minimalism and Body Art in the Work of Chris Burden,” 197, 201.
- 15 Paul Schimmel, “Other Worlds: Interview with Chris Burden,” 34.
- 16 Frank Perrin, “An Administration of Extreme Urgency.”
- 17 Stuart Morgan, “Survival Kit,” 54.
- 18 These include *I Became a Secret Hippy* (1971), *You’ll Never See My Face in Kansas City* (1971), *Jaizu* (1972), and *Shadow* (1976), all works in which Burden refused to reveal himself, in various ways.
- 19 Sharp and Béar, “The Church of Human Energy,” 54, emphasis added.
- 20 Bewley, “Chris Burden in Conversation with Jon Bewley,” 20.
- 21 In 1973 Burden allowed that *Shoot* might physically be repeated, but that to do so would be too theatrical: “Getting shot is something you could do for a circus over and over and over,” but has distanced himself from that potential; “The unknown’s gone. I mean, there’s no point in ever getting shot again” (Sharp and Béar, “The Church of Human Energy,” 58, 61). Twenty years later he again distinguished the work from theatre by his desire not to repeat it: “I never saw myself as an actor. I’d never stand in front of an audience and do *Shoot* over again, for example” (Bewley, 23). Reference to chance, here, might also suggest some connection to the rifle-shot paintings, called *tirs*, by Nikki de Saint Phalle in the early 1960s, a process in which Robert Rauschenberg also participated (suggesting, in turn, John Cage’s extensive influence on post-1945 American art). See Paul Schimmel, “Leap into the Void,” 40–41.
- 22 Bewley, 22.
- 23 Moisan, “Border Crossing: Interview with Chris Burden,” 9.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 This may recall, if at some distance, Habermas’s account of the ideal type of bourgeois subjectivity as it emerged from the bourgeois family, discussed in the Introduction (nowhere, perhaps, is Habermas’s idealism clearer).
- 26 Kathy O’Dell has referred to such expectations in terms of specifically masochistic contracts, grounded largely in Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation of masochism in *Coldness and Cruelty*. See O’Dell, “Toward a Theory of Performance Art: An Investigation of Its Sites,” 96ff.

- 27 Bewley, 17.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 20–21.
- 29 Sarmiento, “Chris Burden: Interview with Jose Antonio Sarmiento,” 56.
- 30 The phrase is the novelist J. G. Ballard’s, from *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1990). There, he writes: “As you and I know, the act of intercourse is now always a model for something else” (77). Quoting this, Mark Seltzer has added: “The body, one might say, always becomes visible as a model for something else. The something else for which the body increasingly appears as a model is the public sphere. . . . The spectacular public representation of violated bodies”—not just via Hollywood, but more daily via the news—“has come to function as a way of imagining and situating, albeit in violently pathologized form, the very idea of ‘the public.’” (Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture*, 34–35.) See also Mary Anne Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe.”
- 31 Author’s notes, Chris Burden in conversation with David Ross, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 8 April 1997. Burden’s approach might be contrasted with that of Donald Judd, for instance, whose Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, provides a permanent, ideal home for his work.
- 32 Plagens, “He Got Shot—for His Art,” D3. Plagens continued: “But—so it came to me later—so is all art: yours, mine, Burden’s or Wegman’s” (work by William Wegman was also discussed in the text). Conceivably, it might be possible to argue that, as far as its relation to its historical context goes, enabling this recognition was the point of *Shoot*.
- 33 Here one might refer to the infamous Kitty Genovese case in New York in 1964, in which thirty-eight witnesses watched Ms Genovese be attacked and killed. One sociological response to that case, which became a national media symbol for the failure of public responsibility, argued for the “bystander effect” mentioned in the Introduction, along with “diffusion of responsibility,” such that an individual was less likely to intervene as the number of bystanders increased. B. Latané and J. M. Darley, *The Unresponsive Bystander*.
- 34 Bewley, 19.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 38 Sarmiento, 56.
- 39 Here it is pertinent to recall Susan Sontag’s observation that “an Event” has become anything “worth photographing,” which “makes it easy to feel that any event, once underway, and whatever its moral character, should be allowed to complete itself—so that something else can be brought into the world, the photograph.” *On Photography*, 11.

- 40 Given the collaborative aspect of the work, he might have provided his friend the marksman with a similar experience, or one all the more private, necessarily, because—legally—it could not be owned up to publicly. Jon Bewley remarked that he would “feel shocked at being implicated in the act of someone being shot,” but Burden’s friend was more than implicated (Bewley, 21).
- 41 Sharp and Béar, “The Church of Human Energy,” 60.
- 42 White, “Chris Burden: Interview with Robin White,” 17.
- 43 Chris Burden in Schimmel, “Other Worlds: Interview with Chris Burden,” 29. Pushing museums down is a reference to his work *Samson* (1985), an enormous jack pushing against the walls of the museum and connected to a turnstile so that each visitor fractionally increases the pressure against the walls. Burden’s point is that the machine is geared down so far that, while it has the physical potential to push the walls down, as a practical matter this could never happen, and that the point of the work is metaphorical. This is a demurral that should be borne in mind, in the face of arguments that the crucial element of his earlier performances was his actual presence.
- 44 Sharp and Béar, “The Church of Human Energy,” 58.
- 45 Here one is reminded of the deadly, punitive writing-machine of Franz Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” written in 1914.
- 46 Here Burden’s wound resonates with Mark Seltzer’s account of contemporary “wound culture,” in which the wound “is by now no longer the mark, the stigmata, of the sacred or heroic: it is the icon, or stigma, of the everyday openness of every body” (*Serial Killers*, 2).
- 47 This seems to have been the point of the later work, *Show the Hole* (4 March 1980), in which Burden received viewers at an Italian performance festival, one at a time, in a velvet-curtained booth (a fortune-teller in reverse, perhaps). He greeted them and asked them to sit, “Then, looking at them, I said, ‘In 1971 I did a performance in which I was shot in the arm.’ Finally, I would roll up my sleeve and as I pointed with my finger at the scar in my arm, I would say ‘The bullet went in here and came out there.’” (Burden, “Original Texts 1971–1995.”)
- 48 Seltzer gives an account of the public sphere that turns pathological, as the self is experienced as a typicality within. Seltzer quotes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to the effect that there is “always something statistical in our loves, and something belonging to the laws of large numbers” (Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, 31). Burden’s work may represent an attempt to resist seeing the self, in its most intimate connections, in this way.
- 49 As Susan Sontag argues: “A photograph that brings news of some unsuspected zone of misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless

- there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude,” and “Americans did have access to photographs of the suffering of the Vietnamese (many of which came from military sources and were taken with quite a different use in mind) because journalists felt backed in their efforts to obtain those photographs, the event having been defined by a significant number of people as a savage colonialist war” (*On Photography*, 17, 18).
- 50 The newsreader Walter Cronkite is perhaps the signal example.
- 51 A public constituted around representations of violence might be concerned with questions of political legitimation, as in the case of opposition to the Vietnam War. The public constituted around *Shoot* might in Habermasian terms be seen in relation to social pathology (though this might also be true of the public opposed to the war). But if *Shoot* invoked a public, the constitution of which *depended* upon a dilemma, or suspension, of responsibility, it may be seen to have generated an aversive form of the public, as a comment on the spectacularization of violence, but a form that implied in the negative more ideal conceptions of the public.
- 52 White, “Chris Burden: Interview with Robin White,” 17. Though he has also said “I always see myself as Chris Burden” (Sharp and Béar, “The Church of Human Energy,” 58).
- 53 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 8.
- 54 The others are *Shout Piece* (21 August 1971), in which Burden, barely visible behind bright lights aimed at incoming viewers, screamed at those viewers to leave; *Match Piece* (20 March 1972), in which he fired “match rockets” at a naked woman collaborator lying on the gallery floor, and 747 (5 January 1973), in which the assault was more notional, described as follows: “At about 8a.m. at a beach near the Los Angeles airport, I fired several shots with a pistol at a Boeing 747.” (“Original Texts 1971–1995.”)
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 Sharp and Béar, “The Church of Human Energy,” 57.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 Burden, “Original Texts 1971–1995.”
- 59 O’Dell, “Toward a Theory of Performance Art: An Investigation of Its Sites,” 231, emphasis added. See also O’Dell’s note 54, 271.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 232. The charge against Burden, Plagens noted, was based on a “1968 (year of the riots)” law aimed at countering bomb threats (“He Got Shot—for His Art,” D3).
- 61 Barbara Smith, “Art Piece Brings Arrest,” 3. Smith’s essay initiated a flurry of correspondence for and against the validity of Burden’s work, by artists among others, in which the work was largely seen as an ethical problem, or as raising (or abusing) questions of artistic responsibility.
- 62 An instance of the collapse of the public sphere in the face of spectacle

- culture, perhaps, or of Latané and Darley's "bystander effect." See note 33, above.
- 63 From one riot to another: it seems only coincidental that Burden was arrested in 1972 under a law made in response to civil disturbances, often racially charged, in the 1960s, when the L.A.P.D. was seen by many as a racist, repressive, authoritarian force; Burden's sculptural installation *L.A.P.D. Uniform* (1992), however, was made after and evidently in response to the violence sparked by the acquittal of several L.A.P.D. officers in the Rodney King beating incident, and used distortions of scale to provoke a reflection on perceptions of the police. It consisted of thirty, seven-foot-tall replicas of L.A.P.D. uniforms complete with guns, batons, etc.: "Viewed from a distance, the uniforms appear to be normal size; close up, they assume larger-than-life proportions." (Burden, "Original Texts 1971–1995.") Like *Show the Hole*, and other works, this is an example of the way that Burden has recycled and reincorporated earlier experiences into later works.
- 64 Sharp and Béar, "The Church of Human Energy," 60.
- 65 So it might be suggested that the demand was for self-determination, a kind of artistic right-to-die. But then, if euthanasia is considered as *self-killing*, this might in turn support the argument that one effect of Burden's work was to evacuate subjective interiority.
- 66 Acconci, "Some Notes on Illegality in Art," 70.
- 67 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 68 Unless we envisage the discourse of the public sphere itself as nostalgic or romantic.

FOUR: ABRAMOVIĆ

- 1 Grant Kester, in *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art*, provides perhaps the most thoughtful, positive account of this. It's perhaps worth noting that extra-artistic identitarian communities may converge with the art community around certain practices.
- 2 In her unpublished paper "Wait, Don't Shoot," Amy Lyford points to a dialogical relation between work made at Womanhouse, specifically Faith Wilding's performance *Waiting*, and Burden's work.
- 3 Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 227.
- 4 Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 229, 229–32; Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xli, xl.
- 5 Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 155.
- 6 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 14.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 8 Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 157.

- 9 *Ibid.*, 158.
- 10 Kester would argue vehemently against such a position, and in favor of what he calls “dialogical practice,” that is, community-based practice that engenders “the politically coherent community,” in which an artist “takes up an enunciative position sanctioned by [an identitarian] group’s social experience” (148). There is much to be said in favor of tactical articulations of community, but Kester’s account of ideal collaborations is unable fully to escape the problems inherent in speaking for others.
- 11 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*.
- 12 Miwon Kwon has addressed this in her critique of Kester’s position, where she argues, in terms consistent with Young’s, that Kester’s “politically coherent community . . . implies that subjects within that community are unified subjects, that their sense of who they are and where they are is transparent to themselves, not only to themselves, but to others.” (Kwon, “Public Art and Urban Identities,” 167.)
- 13 Agamben grounds his account of the coming politics on what is arguably a naïve account of the events at Tiananmen Square (Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 85–87).
- 14 *Ibid.*, 1–2.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 85.
- 17 The five works by other artists were: Bruce Nauman, *Body Pressure*, 1974/reenacted 9 Nov. 2005; Vito Acconci, *Seedbed*, 1972/reenacted Nov. 10; Valie EXPORT, *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, 1969/reenacted Nov. 11; Gina Pane, *The Conditioning*, 1973/reenacted Nov. 12; Joseph Beuys, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965/reenacted Nov. 13.
- 18 Not only by the space, but by the Guggenheim’s own recent exhibition history, which has featured exhibitions of the work of Giorgio Armani, as well as Matthew Barney, and a show on motorcycles.
- 19 Thomas McEvilley, “Stages of Energy: Performance Art Ground Zero?,” 16.
- 20 Obrist, “Talking with Marina Abramović,” 42–44.
- 21 Marina Abramović, “Solo Performances, 1969–1976,” 56.
- 22 My thanks to Indira Mesihovic.
- 23 Abramović, “Solo Performances, 1969–1976,” 69.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 70.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 See, respectively, Thomas McEvilley, “Marina Abramović/Ulay, Ulay/Marina Abramović,” 52 and “The Serpent in the Stone,” 46; Paul Schim-

- mel, "Leap into the Void: Performance and the Object," 101; Tracey Warr, ed., "Works," 124; RoseLee Goldberg, "Here and Now," 11; Warr, "Works," 124; McEvelley, "The Serpent in the Stone," 46.
- 29 "I started walking to the public and everybody run away and never actually confronted with me" (Abramović, "Body Art," 30).
- 30 McEvelley, "Marina Abramović/Ulay, Ulay/Marina Abramović," 52.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 McEvelley, "The Serpent in the Stone," 46.
- 33 McEvelley, "Marina Abramović/Ulay, Ulay/Marina Abramović," 52; Goldberg, "Here and Now," 11.
- 34 Iles, "Cleaning the Mirror," 21–2.
- 35 Schimmel, "Leap into the Void," 101.
- 36 Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, 2.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 38 Kristine Stiles, "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions," 306.
- 39 Moisan, "Border Crossing: Interview with Chris Burden," 6.
- 40 In McEvelley's account of random and art-world factions, this effect is seen to be engineered, by presuming the hostility of the non-specialized audience ("Marina Abramović/Ulay, Ulay/Marina Abramović," 52).
- 41 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 8.
- 42 Ono performed *Cut Piece* four times, including once at Carnegie Hall, New York. The contexts in which Burden's and Abramović's performances took place, especially earlier in their careers, tended to be less formal, as in small art school, gallery, and "alternative" spaces.
- 43 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 85.
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 "Love is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love): The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is. The lover desires that *as only insofar as it is such*" (Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 2, emphasis in original).
- 46 Iles, "Cleaning the Mirror," 21.
- 47 Nancy Fraser, "Recognition without Ethics?," 99.
- 48 Iles, "Cleaning the Mirror," 22.
- 49 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 1.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 51 In such remarks, for instance, as "My idea is to examine the limits of the Eastern body and the Western body," where her privileged access to this is provided by her interactions with holy men and shamans from different cultures (Obrist, "Talking with Marina Abramović," 44).

- 52 Abramović, “Body Art,” 30.
 53 Abramović, “Solo Performances 1969–1976,” 98.
 54 *Ibid.*

FIVE: HSIEH

- 1 The original titles of the works, according to email correspondence with the artist (19 February 2006 and 19 December 2011), are listed below, together with the informal titles, in parentheses, by which five of the six are distinguished for convenience:
 1. *One Year Performance 1978–1979 (Cage Piece)*;
 2. *One Year Performance 1980–1981 (Time Clock Piece)*;
 3. *One Year Performance 1981–1982 (Outdoor Piece)*;
 4. *One Year Performance 1983–1984 (Rope Piece)* [this is also known as *Art/Life*, which Hsieh describes as Linda Montano’s title for it, email correspondence, 5 April 2006];
 5. *One Year Performance 1985–1986*; this is sometimes referred to as the *No Art Piece*;
 6. *Tehching Hsieh 1986–1999 (Thirteen Year Plan)*, which has also been referred to as *Earth* by Steven Shaviro in “Performing Life: The Work of Tehching Hsieh,” the essay that accompanies the DVD-ROM that Hsieh self-published in 2000, *Tehching Hsieh: One Year Performance Art Documents 1978–1999* [Tehching Hsieh, 2000], not implausibly, given the image of the globe that appears on the collaged final text of the piece, and remarks that Hsieh made during the “public report,” the video documentation of which appears on the DVD-ROM, that having made it into the new millennium, “we have not made a big mistake yet, the earth is still alive.”)
- 2 Details of the works, including photographs and the various printed documents (statements, posters, maps, etc.), and the film documentation of *Time Clock Piece*, *Outdoor Piece*, and the “public report” on *Thirteen Year Plan*, are provided in the DVD-ROM, *Tehching Hsieh: One Year Performance Art Documents 1978–1999*. This is the source for the statements about what was meant to and/or did happen (drawn from the typed statements that Hsieh issued with each performance) here, and unless otherwise noted is the source for quotations from the work throughout the chapter. Hsieh’s “public report” on the thirteen-year project was unveiled at Judson Church in New York on 1 January 2000, where the following text was read by Martha Wilson: “I kept myself alive. I passed the Dec 31, 1999,” before Hsieh made a brief statement and answered several questions from audience members.

- 3 Tehching Hsieh, email correspondence with the author, 19 July 2009; see also Heathfield, "I Just Go in Life," 327.
- 4 Joe Hannan, who was publicist at the New York alternative arts space, The Kitchen, 1978–1980, reports that his encounter with Hsieh's work was via "some level of buzz" around the earliest works, among the downtown art community, and through the posters that Hsieh issued. Email correspondence with the author, 17 July 2009.
- 5 This very small community might be seen to include the friend who took care of Hsieh in *Cage Piece*, Cheng Wei Kuong, and his collaborator, Linda Montano, in *Rope Piece*.
- 6 We have seen the collapsing together of performance and domestic spaces in Acconci's work, for instance, and the deployment of both passivity and duration in works by Burden and Abramović.
- 7 *Rope Piece*, after all, tied an Asian man and a white woman together.
- 8 Tehching Hsieh, *Tehching Hsieh: One Year Performance Art Documents 1978–1999*, self-published DVD-ROM, 2000.
- 9 Adrian Heathfield applies the term "lifeworks" to Hsieh's works, in relation to their "absolute conception and enactment of art and life as simultaneous processes." (Heathfield, "Impress of Time," 11.)
- 10 Jill Johnston, "Tehching Hsieh: Art's Willing Captive," 140.
- 11 In this vein, Amelia Jones argues that "body art practices *perform* the gradual but dramatic shift that has occurred over this past half century in the very articulation of the subject within the social domain" (Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 19).
- 12 "But what if that self is not fixed and determinable, but rather, a mutable, changeable term?" (Linker, *Vito Acconci*, 7); "While body art is not the *only* type of cultural production to instantiate the dispersal of the modernist subject . . . it is one of the most dramatic and thorough to do so" (Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 11). Much work in this vein has been important in elaborating relations among performance, subjectivity, and identity, but these are not, in my view, the main concerns activated by Hsieh's work.
- 13 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 18. If it seems anachronistic to examine Hsieh's status in relation to language propagated by the Department of Homeland Security, it should be noted that Agamben has subsequently developed the analysis of the logic of sovereignty in *Homo Sacer* (which departs from the eponymous figure of Roman law, "The sacred man is one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide," 71); in *State of Exception*, Agamben argues that the state of exception, in which sovereignty abrogates to itself the right to suspend the law,

subtends the rise of modern democracies, so that 1988's "illegal alien" contains within it the "detainee" created by the Patriot Act of 2001: "Not only do the Taliban captured in Afghanistan not enjoy the status of POWs as defined by the Geneva Convention, they do not even have the status of persons charged with a crime according to American laws. Neither prisoners nor person accused, but simply 'detainees,' they are the object of a pure de facto rule, of a detention that is indefinite not only in the temporal sense but in its very nature as well, since it is entirely removed from the law and from judicial oversight," Agamben, *State of Exception*, 3.

- 14 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 19.
- 15 Johnston, 143.
- 16 See "Immigration Terms and Definitions Involving Aliens," www.irs.gov/businesses/small/international/article/0,,id=129236,00.html.
- 17 This might also suggest the more frequent concerns of internet searchers.
- 18 "An alien in and admitted to the United States subject to any grounds of removal specified in the Immigration and Nationality Act. This includes any alien illegally in the United States, regardless of whether the alien entered the country by fraud or misrepresentation or entered legally but subsequently lost legal status." See "Data Standards and Definitions," uscis.gov/graphics/shared/statistics/standards/stdfdef.htm.
- 19 Saskia Sassen, "Economic Restructuring as Class and Spatial Polarization," and "A New Urban Regime?," *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (2001), 251–345. Sassen argues that "global cities" emerge as management and service centers for globalized industries, and that "a whole array of companies that produce goods and services that indirectly or directly service the firms in the new industrial core have growing difficulty surviving in those cities," and their reliance on low-cost and even illegal labor is one consequence of this (335). The political aspect of this is perhaps seen most clearly in the traditionally anti-immigrant Japanese acceptance of illegal immigrant labor as a given, at the level of government policy (317–21).
- 20 Hsieh was clearly aware of this, having made an ironic self-portrait in the form of a "wanted" poster, which is discussed later.
- 21 In fact, under current rules, he might be counted alongside himself. "Apprehension" is defined as "The arrest of a removable alien by the Department of Homeland Security. *Each apprehension of the same alien in a fiscal year is counted separately*" (emphasis added). See "Data Standards and Definitions," uscis.gov/graphics/shared/statistics/standards/stdfdef.htm.
- 22 Johnston, 143. (Despite Hsieh's occasional discomfort in English, there might be a distinction to be made between making a form *for* one's

feelings, as a more tenuous gesture than, say, the more expressive option of making a form *of* them or out of them.)

- 23 Heathfield, "I Just Go in Life," 326.
- 24 Author's public conversation with Tehching Hsieh, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum symposium, "(Re)presenting Performance," New York, 8 April 2005. Hsieh also acknowledged his parents in his remarks about *Thirteen Year Plan* on 1 January 2000.
- 25 Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Tehching Hsieh," 143.
- 26 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7.
- 27 Email correspondence with the author, 17 July 2009.
- 28 Alex and Allyson Grey, "The Year of the Rope: An Interview with Linda Montano & Tehching Hsieh," 30.
- 29 C. Carr, "Roped: A Saga of Art in Everyday Life," 5.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Heathfield, "I Just Go in Life," 335.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 338.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 336.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 338.

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